

A CULTURAL SENSITIVITY AND MISSIONAL TRAINING MODULE
FOR LAY-LEADERS IN PREPARATION FOR
MINISTRY TO HIP-HOP CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

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The objective of this project was to develop, implement, and evaluate an informational cultural sensitivity and missional training program. The program offered training to a co-ed focus group of lay-leaders at Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Columbus, Ohio. The group was challenged with new information and approaches to ministry. The program met expectations and confirmed that structured training, evaluation, and reflection are necessary for missional progress. A mixed research methodology was used to measure the findings of this research project.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My Dad said to me that he wanted to go back to school and get his doctorate. He passed away before he had the chance to apply. I wish he could see me now. Special thanks go to my mentors Dr. Millicent Hunter, Dr. Derrick Johnson and Dr. David Rusk for first-class insight, guidance and direction. To my fellow scholars in the Hunter-Johnson peer group, you have inspired me, encouraged me, challenged me and journeyed with me. Words are not enough. We are family for life.

To Dr. Donald Burden, the elders and members of Ephesus SDA Church, you own a large portion of this. You gave ample space and opportunity for research and writing while I worked on this. You supported this from start to finish and I will always be grateful. To my Hillcrest family, you gave nothing but support while I finished this. I am deeply appreciative. Claudia, you are an editorial wizard! Thank you.

Christopher, you inspire me. I pray that the example I set will inspire you just the same. I love you the most! ;-D

Finally, to my wonderful wife, Tracy: There are no words sufficient to describe the goodness you have given to me while I worked on this. You let me lock myself in my office on so many occasions and occasionally knocked to bring a meal or a snack. From the exorbitant cost of books, travel, and hotels, the weeks away and truncated family time. You never complained. You only encouraged me. You are the rarest treasure. 143 & 143!

DEDICATION

In loving memory of one of the most brilliant and kind individuals I have ever met.

Teleka C. Patrick, MD, Ph.D.

1983-2014

Ye' you know how we do, we do it for the people
And the struggle of the bruthas and the folks
The lovers of the dope, experiment to discover hope

—“The People” Common

INTRODUCTION

Death made a trip to the old family church in Beaufort, South Carolina necessary. On Saturday the funeral services for a close relative were held in one of the oldest churches in Beaufort, First African Baptist Church (FAB) established by freed slaves in 1865. A monument to the strength and fortitude of this black community, the current edifice, constructed in 1885, served as a prominent place of worship for many well-known black families for several years. Today, FAB is little more than a shell of its former glory.

The following day was the much-anticipated Sunday service. Disappointingly, this liturgy merely presented a harrowing reminder of the challenges that presently lay before the church. In attendance were approximately sixty people, a far cry from the nine hundred members in its heyday. With no musicians on duty there was no inspiring music throughout the service. Parishioners were graced with a less-than flattering rendition of "Wade in the Water" before they were vehemently admonished by the pastor about the "Sin That'll Keep You Out of Heaven."

While it is true that sin separates humanity from God and will keep many out of Heaven, this notion, however pertinent, does not address what is currently keeping people out of church. This decline in church attendance within African American Protestant churches serves as the primary motive for this study. It argues that churches need to find new methods and avenues for reaching and retaining the masses.

Hip-Hop has proven to be a subculture that has both infiltrated and incarnated communities across the United States and around the world irrespective of race, class, gender, or sexual orientation. Such a global reception and replication of a cultural medium must not be ignored or flippantly dismissed as merely a demonic influence. Hip-Hop as a form of cultural expression must be embraced as an avenue or opportunity to reach people for the kingdom. While it looks and behaves differently from the traditional African American protestant church, its purpose reflects many of the same principles that both established and buoyed black communities during Reconstruction through the Harlem Renaissance and into the Civil Rights Movement.

Whenever someone talks about Hip-Hop they usually connect the concept directly to rap music. This correlation causes many to articulate deficient generalizations about African American people and Hip-Hop as cultural expression. These conclusions are deficient because they are based on mainstream rap music that usually portrays African American men as violent, misogynist criminals. Making the definitive and exclusive correlation that Hip-Hop is rap and rap is Hip-Hop is problematic because it bolsters the stereotype that Hip-Hop culture is primarily concerned with crime, violence, and the subjugation and objectification of women. While rap music does represent a portion of Hip-Hop culture, it does not represent Hip-Hop in its fullness. Hip-Hop is not simply music. It is not simply dance. It is not simply graffiti. Hip-Hop is all of those things and more. Hip-Hop is one of the most vibrant forms of creative cultural expression and social resistance the world has seen in the last half century.

Regardless of the global impact of this cultural expression, Hip-Hop makes church folk uncomfortable. Churches must realize that being uncomfortable with Hip-

Hop is being uncomfortable with the world. Nevertheless, a church's level of discomfort does not absolve its pastoral leadership and attending members of their responsibility to go into the world and make disciples. Churches must learn how to engage the world for Christ. Churches must learn how to engage Hip-Hop.

The following study is a contextual research project conducted at the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church. This project sought to promote cultural sensitivity and missional readiness with Hip-Hop culture as the primary topic of focus. The term Hip-Hop is used extensively to identify the whole of Hip-Hop culture. In this study Hip-Hop is also used interchangeably with the various elements of Hip-Hop. The four elements of Hip-Hop are breaking or break dancing, djing, emceeing or rapping, and graffiti. The music refers to that which is produced by the DJ and performed by the emcee. The emcee/rapper is not the only performer. The DJ is a performer in her own right. Breakers or break-dancers are also performers. The often-excluded fifth element is knowledge; be it knowledge of self, knowledge of history, etcetera. Hence, the term element(s) is often used to refer to the various parts of Hip-Hop.

This study begins with a ministerial focus. The first chapter shares reflections of personal life and spiritual experiences that have led the author to this particular research project. Chapter one also explores the local context in an effort to assess the needs and challenges of the research context. The second chapter contains the Biblical foundations of the research project. In this chapter the new covenant described in Isaiah 56:1-8 along with Paul's great sermon on Mars Hill (Acts 17:16-34) is interrogated. The third chapter contains a short historical survey of Hip-Hop culture in an effort to reveal the social

justice underpinnings, creative genius, and fruitfulness of Hip-Hop economically amongst impoverished urban youth.

The fourth chapter exposes the theological foundations of Hip-Hop. This chapter spotlights the incarnation of Christ as a framework for missiology and contemporary urban ministry. The fifth chapter contains theoretical foundations. Modern authors, scholars, and practitioners are surveyed in an effort to compare and contrast various issues and methods of engagement. The sixth chapter contains the project implementation plan, process and outcome. The data from the project is both presented and analyzed in this chapter. Finally, the seventh chapter contains the summary, reflection and conclusion of this study.

The church as the body of Christ will never die. However, consistent attendance amongst many African American Protestant churches is declining. What can be done to increase attendance while inspiring devotion within parishioners? The following study presents another answer to this challenging question.

CHAPTER ONE

MINISTRY FOCUS

He was eighteen, a Marine, and recent college dropout. As the story goes, she called the barracks looking for someone else, but he answered the phone. The rest is...well...you all know the rest. With her youngest only a few months old and her oldest graduating from high school, she realized she was thirty-seven and single with six kids. She wrote him a letter begging him to take care of his responsibility, but never got a reply. In fact, there is a chance he never even received the letter.

It was the summer of 1982 and the Israelis and Palestinians were engulfed in what was known as the 1982 Lebanon War. He was one of the 800 US Marines sent to force the Palestinian Liberation Organization out of Lebanon. This heated summer conflict came to be known as The Siege of Beirut. You probably never heard of this war and you definitely didn't know that the US was involved. Yet, sure enough, he was there. It must have been an amazingly terrifying experience for a teenager. When he came back to the states he was awarded The Bronze Star for heroism in combat and given a job at the Pentagon. One might suggest that this was the military equivalent of "hush money" after having experienced terrible trauma that supposedly never happened.

On November 27, 1983, more than a year and some months later, he finally wrote her back. Surprisingly, he didn't even mention his firstborn (and only) son who was just about to turn one year old on December 28th. He did mention that his apartment was broken into, he wasn't able to make long distance phone calls, and he hated writing

letters and didn't really feel like writing this one. In closing he assured her that she was in his thoughts and bid farewell. That was all...until more than twenty years later.

Moving around for those next few years, this struggling single-mother finally settled in a quiet little neighborhood with tiny little shotgun houses. Well they weren't really shotgun houses, but they really weren't much more than that. By this time her baby was five and kindergarten was their greatest challenge and greatest joy. Walking her new student a mile and a half each morning to a black owned private school named Little People's College, she would drop off her son and continue to walk two miles to work.

It was obviously a burden for her, but an adventure for a rambunctious 5 year old. Some mornings it rained and the wind threatened to rip the weak little umbrella to shreds. She turned it forward so that wind and rain didn't swoop under and ruin her work clothes. Mom prayed often, "Lord just get me and my baby through this." Over the years, that prayer has always meant a lot.

I attended Little People's College for half the day and the public school across town the other half. I was smart as a whip and top of the class at both schools. To my teachers I showed great promise and potential. First grade meant no more walking. Now it was time to go to public school and ride the bus with the big kids. My other siblings went to a different school that let out later so the front door key was pinned in the front left pocket everyday. I was a true latchkey kid at the ripe old age of seven.

First grade was short-lived. Mrs. Ward wasn't a big fan of smart-alecky behavior so there I made frequent trips to Mr. Smith's office—the school principal. To add insult to injury the work was simply too easy. Convinced that each day's routine was going to be exactly the same, the resolution was to save time by doing the assignments while she

explained them. Before long, Mr. Smith and Mrs. Ward finally had to agree that second grade was probably a better fit. “Hello Mrs. Sperry!”

First day in class and I wasn’t in there five minutes before she asked me to come to the board to identify the stamen of a plant. With all eyes on me, it felt like everyone was questioning how smart I really was. Pointing to the correct part of the flower’s anatomy, everyone gasped in surprise. From that moment on I recognized my capacity for academic and intellectual achievement. The challenge was not allowing my circumstances to cause or distract me into (as a personal spiritual sister would say) “Living below my privilege.” That was easier said than done.

Just after starting third grade Grandpa died. I never really had a close relationship with him, but my siblings and I made several visits to his house. The thing about Grandpa’s house was that he had a lot of cats. The cats were everywhere: in the house, in the kitchen, in the dining room, in the living room and all over the yard. They were everywhere! It was like a cat conference center. The house belonged to my mother’s family. With everyone else living so far north, Mom and her crew were invited to move in. This required one last move across town to the historic district of downtown Beaufort.

Eight year olds don’t know much about breakthroughs and major blessings, but this was one. The opportunity to live rent-free and simply pay the annual taxes on the property was a definite miracle. Yes this move was a blessing for the family, but it was a nightmare for me. Grandpa’s house in Beaufort is where the abuse intensified. It actually started at the old house across town. But here at the new house there was regular abuse at the hands of a trusted family member. Between getting beat up and teased at school, and

getting abused at home there was little that could make this new neighborhood a happy place in my mind.

Fighting back against the bullies at school meant becoming a type of bully as well. It's like a bully acceptance code. If you can stand up to the bullies, or befriend the bullies, or become a bully yourself, then the bullying stops—at least to some extent. That's pretty much how it happened. Art was (and has always been) an outlet for me. It turned out that one of the biggest bullies was a pretty skilled artist as well. We quickly became friends. He was just like me; smart as a whip, gifted athlete, artistically talented, but too many distractions. He ended up going to prison on drug charges.

By the start of sixth grade, it seemed like the abuse was pretty much over. By this time so much anger had developed inside of me. Along with that anger and frustration came a reputation for bad behavior. Many predicted that my story would end just like that my bully-friend from the third grade. But there was one major monkey wrench in my growth process that turned my life in another direction the summer of fifth grade.

One Sunday morning the family was still asleep and obviously extremely late for church. Something was clearly amiss. It wasn't long after coming to this realization, that Mom gathered everyone together to break the news. There was a terrible accident. The second oldest of the clan and oldest boy, who was away serving in the Air Force had drowned in a boating accident. That thing hit the family ferociously hard. This was the kind of thing you watched on television. We never expected it to happen to us!

Sinking into a deep depression, Mom became unsatisfied with church for a long time. She had the entire family attending church multiple nights a week. What has become so crystal clear now is that she was looking for a new church home. One church

in particular was shepherded by a pastor that always wore a pretty white robe with red bars down the front and three red bars on each arm. But through the ears of a little person, his words weren't even intelligible. When Douglas died at the fresh young age of twenty-two, Mom struggled for a very long time to gather herself emotionally. Shortly after he died, Mom brought home a flyer for an evangelistic tent meeting.

The local Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) church had recently hired a gifted young preacher in the person of Christopher Clayton Varner, affectionately known as Pastor C.C. Every night Mom made it a point to go down front after service and shake the pastor's hand. He would reach down from the custom built platform with the purple and white decorations, stick out his hand and say, "Namesake!" What a coincidence right? Christopher Clayton, meet Christopher Charles. The SDA church became our family. The elders and deaconesses became surrogate aunts and uncles. It was kind of like being adopted. This was a breath of fresh air for the whole family, but especially for me.

Mom was the black sheep of her family. The oldest child of her mother, and the only child of her father; she was cast aside by the younger siblings from her mother's later marriage. Needless to say, none of my siblings ever formed very deep and lasting bonds with our aunts and uncles. As the youngest and only child of my father, I also felt like the outsider. I was picked on often and frequently beat up, blamed, left out, left behind, and then some. But that's the type of stuff that normally happens to the baby though right? If so, it doesn't make it hurt any less. For example, one day the next-door neighbor had threatened to get me for laughing at her or playing a practical joke on her. She was with my second oldest sister (Bernadette) in high school and ten years my senior. Hours later, the matter was forgotten, and she came over and politely knocked on

the door. Bernadette opened the door and she walked right into the room where everyone was sitting, slapped me in the face, and walked out. It wasn't the slap that hurt as much as the fact that four older siblings just sat there and watched her walk out the door. That type of stuff happened often, or at least it seemed that way.

There were three girls and four boys in the Thompson clan. The middle boy was adopted. An actual biological cousin, Mom took him in when he was only four years old and raised him as her own. There's Angie, then Douglas (who died), Bernadette (or Berni), then Tyron (the adopted one), Jessica, Richard, and then me. Fights with Jessica were like vitamins, at least one-a-day. Jessica always seemed to lose the battle, but win the war. It was never her fault, despite her conniving and scheming. They always took her side, and it burned like a hot iron. It was clear that I was the object of their hate, or at least it seemed that way.

Nevertheless, the SDA church gave great respite because there were young people, activities, games and events that served as meaningful distractions for a disrupted bunch. Speaking of disruptions, the principal's office was a regular stop for that very offense—disrupting class. There was so much anger and anxiety due to the abandonment by Dad and the abuse that there was little to no self-control and self-management skills. Mom threatened at the start of sixth-grade: one trip to the principal's office spelled a transfer to the SDA church school. She knew what she was doing, and that it was impossible to avoid the principal's office completely. Only six weeks and three referrals later (the latest concerning an incident that included a tennis racket and a mouthy white girl), Beaufort SDA Christian School received their first installment of the Thompson crew.

Just like the church, those three years were much needed respite. Smaller environment, Christian teachers, uniforms and a constant diet of spiritually motivated curriculum and events all played a major role in creating a stopgap to a potentially terrifying future. It was during these middle school years that God first spoke to me. Doubtless it was indeed divine prompting, from me God got the cold shoulder. Isn't it deep how God deals with rejection? There is still so much to learn—that is, about rejection. Nevertheless, seventh and eighth grade saw major academic improvements.

On the other hand, high school was a bad drug. Pent up anger, combined with a craving for attention, affirmation and love made a recipe for disaster. Having listened to rap music since childhood there was a natural likening, but by this point there was complete consumption of the entire culture altogether: the clothes, the lingo, the music and the dances. It was like an outward artistic expression of my innermost angers, passions and dreams—a soundtrack of my life if you will: totally, completely, all in. However, the negativity and venom that spewed from so many of the lyrics had a poisoning effect on an impressionable and vulnerable mind. I needed help, and Hip-Hop made high school worse.

I was so cool. A friend from L.A. often said, “He thinks he’s too cool for school” to describe people who were doing too much or trying too hard. It always drew a hearty laugh when she said it. What was both funny and sad was the man in the mirror. The man in the mirror was the one who was super cool, thinking the world revolved around me. Every thought was about one of four things: basketball, girls, money and rap music. And this is the point where it became a bit reckless, especially as it relates to girls.

Over the years I learned valuable lessons about the sacredness of sex. It's amazing how premature sexual encounters destroy one's sense of relational boundaries. Pleasure stands in the spotlight as the primary goal, and people lose their faces and their value. The tragic thing is that with this framework, one loses their own sense of value in not being able to truly bond with others in a healthy manner. Every relationship is distorted and thus never truly developed or cherished. This gives way to frustration and then again to anger which deepens the cycle of self-loathing. It's terribly difficult to love and honor others when you don't love yourself. What's deeply ironic though is how one masks insecurity and fear with braggadocio and bravado.

The leather and felt letterman jacket, with the green chest and white sleeves was covered with the gold pins from multiple varsity years in tennis, cross country, and basketball. If chasing girls were a sport in high school, there would be at least four more pins for that too—one for each year. With all those sporting events, there was no time for studying and homework. There might have been time, but chasing girls was time-consuming hard work. It was a case study in performing for the crowd, being seen, and becoming (and remaining) popular. And all of this was performed in an effort to suppress the fear, pain, brokenness, and anger from past abuse, abandonment, rejection, lack, and loss. The rap music and peers simply helped to construct the persona that I wanted to project and the vulnerability that I wanted to protect.

By junior year God began to speak loud and clear through various and diverse channels. Bernadette, the second oldest once said, "You have a very dirty mouth." It was one thing for this to come from an older sister, but another thing altogether to come from my church-skipping, club-hopping, heathen older sister. More conviction came that

cleaning up the language was necessary, but would require cleaning up the filthy music. Some of the most appalling albums, like Redman, Muddy Waters, were in heavy rotation. On top of that, after showing her pictures of numerous girlfriends she said, “How would you like someone to treat your sister like that?” Talk about conviction and rebuke! Her words cut straight to the heart. God was moving.

Shortly thereafter, a neighbor and very close mentor spilled the beans to Mom about a certain event involving his son Mike (who everyone called Dogface), sneaking out, to a late night party while she was out of town. Funny thing about that party was seeing this girl’s mom burst in and whip her daughter down the street all the way to the projects. Thoughts of punishment flooded the mind. “Dude! That coulda been you! Wow!” This just made the whole thing funnier, but scary at the same time.

Mom was super vexed and came down real hard. “No more breathing for a month!” That’s not really what she said, but that’s what it seemed like. Crazy thing was, she was out of town again on like the following weekend and without hesitation Dogface and you know who went to yet another party. But this time was different.

The ice was as thin as a sheet of paper, and this time putting on skates didn’t seem like such a good idea. It was Saturday night and Dogface found a ride to this party on the other side of town. The driver couldn’t get him in so he begged around for enough money from people going in to get two tickets. Getting into this party was the worst and best thing that could have happened. It was a high school sponsored party at a teen club and so mostly everyone present was under age. There were people smoking and carrying on like adults. There most likely wasn’t any alcohol, but the smoking was still enough to serve as a convicted of breaking my mother’s rules.

The latest rap music was blasting through the DJ's speakers, lights flashing, hips and thighs shaking and grinding, smoke and sound waves filling every inch of open air. Soon it became unequivocally clear that this was getting old. At the ripe old age of sixteen the thoughts were unforgettable, "We come to the same clubs, with the same music, doing the same dances, with the same girls, wearing the same clothes. This is whack. Mom would flip, and I have to work in the morning anyway." Surprisingly, Dogface agreed and it just so happened that there was a guy who was leaving and headed to the same neighborhood. It was a definite, life-changing miracle-moment; and it happened in a nightclub (of all places).

Just a few months later the church had a youth day program and I was asked to participate in the service. The guest speaker was a Chaplain from the U.S. Marine base nearby. What he preached about has escaped my memory, but one thing is for sure, it was a really sharp word to the young people. Dude was real intense. It didn't even matter though because God had already been speaking clearly over the past few months. By the time He gave an appeal there was no question about what the Lord required. Standing up, one could sense the amazement in the room. We were shocked, surprised, and pleased all at the same time. The first to stand is usually the one under a great deal of conviction. It wasn't long before others followed suit.

My baptism was a couple days after Mom's birthday, only a few months after youth day. Angie (the oldest girl) and her family were in town, supposedly for Mom's birthday, and so they all came to celebrate. Mom was so happy. That was the easy part. The hard part was that senior year was about to start. By this time I had a newfound academic focus. The reality of wasted opportunities and underachievement had long set

in with the 4th quarter report card of sophomore year. Junior year was actually met with an improvement, but this year had to be the best. Furthermore, there was a concrete resolve towards a new start and excellence that would come in college. This was just practice. But practice is never easy.

Mr. Sherman taught physical science in ninth grade, and chemistry in tenth. He was convinced that the schedule for eleventh grade wasn't rigorous enough. Soon after this conviction he passed away. He wished for academic excellence and that was my newfound goal. Had he been able to see the senior year schedule he probably would have still thought the courses weren't rigorous enough. He would have been right, but there was an additional goal: to just graduate and start fresh in college. But that part was fairly easy too. It was the other part that was much more challenging.

Girls still existed; and girls have an uncanny knack for commanding attention. Staying out of girl trouble was challenging. Many hard lessons about reciprocity, purity, and the like began to find unwelcome residence early on in the year, along with a newfound commitment to chastity. Fast forward to the end of the year and a really big test, which had nothing to do with academics. The reigning homecoming queen dated this guy who was (simply put) a square. He thought he was cool but...he wasn't. So one day during lunchtime while walking the halls she grabbed the attention of the fellas while doing some sort of fundraiser (or something). This female was extremely attractive. In Hip Hop Vernacular, "shorty was super fine!" For some reason, she had just miraculously dropped like fifteen pounds or so. She was always pretty, but now she was perfect. The phrase was really flippant and simple and somewhere along the lines of, "When you're done with that bum..."

Today they are very embarrassing and regrettable, but she clearly took it seriously because all of a sudden there was an extra shadow. It was only days later, but she was really in pursuit. It's amazing how one can be trapped with one's own words. A trap and test it would indeed prove to be. This girl was as sweet as could be. She couldn't hurt a fly if she tried her hardest, but man was she powerful. I don't think her parents even knew who she was. She had these really Hispanic American, All-American, middle-class parents who thought she was their little princess, but she was more progressive or should I say aggressive than princess-like. Lately, a lot of young people have been using the term "thirsty" to refer to lust. Well according to their terms, this girl was deeply dehydrated. I spent the entire spring semester dodging her thirst bullets.

The issue really came to a head on prom night while leaving the party. The conversation was really short, "Sooo...what are you about to do?" Then she said "I wanna be with you." And there was silence in heaven for the space of half an hour. Cell phones were becoming pretty popular and despite the fact that they were very expensive, the brand new flip phone served as a much needed bail-out. The perfect excuse was that Berni and Jessica needed a babysitter so they could go to the club. And it was completely true. They had actually called just a few minutes prior to this moment. "Ummm...my sisters need a babysitter so I gotta get home."

You know that feeling when you know exactly what you need to do, but you don't want to do it at all? This was definitely one of those moments. Nevertheless, it was also a deeply defining moment. It was as if the death angel had passed. Even today it still seems like a very real and present danger was averted. Now, it would be really nice to

type that every similar subsequent test was passed with such noble integrity, but then that would be someone else's spiritual autobiography.

Beyond the ladies, there was still this issue of the music and the mind. There was this one instance that served as a very vivid memory. Mom gave directions to be sure to stop at the post office and check the mail. While making a right turn into the post office parking lot a really catchy song came on the radio. The song was Q-Tip's, very catchy, "Vivrant Thing." The beat commanded attention, but the lyrics were a bit seedy. That's when the struggle became crystal clear. The thought came to mind; "What am I supposed to listen to?! This is good music." That summer, before leaving for college the answer came.

Brian was a friend from church who was heavy into music too and just happened to live just a few blocks from my part-time job at Bosworth Woodworking. Working for Bill was hard but fun. He was like a father figure even though he was white. Nevertheless, I needed a ride one day and Brian agreed because he just happened to be heading into town. Brian was real cool. He drank, smoked, and even sold drugs for a minute, but he was trying to sort out the Christianity thing too. On the way, Brian noticed a friend of his traveling in the other direction. Just as they both turned their cars around to meet up Brian's cell phone rang. "Chris meet Hafez. Hafez this my man Chris." Brian couldn't hang out long because an emergency caused him to break out and go somewhere else. "Yo Hafez, can you give him a ride to town? I gotta go handle something?" "Sure bro." It turned out that Hafez was a rapper in a Christian rap group. Hafez was from New York, but there was this dude named Javon who grew up in the neighborhood who was in the group too. It was like he was looking for some inspiration because he was popping

CDs in and out like he was looking for some specific song. He skipped from track to track only getting snippets of the songs. One thing was for sure, whoever those dudes were on the CD, they were bringin' it for real—and they were rapping about God!

He explained that the group was called The Cross Movement. He was jumping between their first and second albums “Heaven’s Mentality” and “House of Representatives.” He said their new album, “Human Emergency” was coming out soon. The Cross Movement had this real heavy New York type, east-coast style of rap, like a Christian version of the Wu-Tang Clan. It was such a refreshing sound. I ended up hanging with Hafez and the “Sons of Power” (as they were called) for that entire summer before college for everything from Bible studies, to shows, rehearsals and writing sessions. It was truly like being a part of a community and feeling at home. That was a sweet send off for college, and a newfound motivation for ministry.

That motivation and initial calling would become a cherished memory on the campus of the Oakwood University, then Oakwood College. There was an overwhelming number of bourgeoisie black people, very few people from South Carolina, and absolutely nobody from Beaufort. It was too much. There was actually a guy in the dorm just a few doors down named Theo. His mom was a lawyer and his dad was a doctor. The thought immediately came, “Wow just like on The Cosby Show. These people really do exist.” He went on to become a medical doctor himself. This made summer and the initial calling so valuable. This was not Kansas Toto and there was indeed no place like home.

About the initial calling, it had taken place just about five months earlier in the spring of senior year. While standing in front of the mirror getting ready for school, God spoke again; this time as an answer to an ongoing prayer about what to do about college.

The dilemma was whether or not I should accept the sports scholarship on the table from a lower-level school; given the rejection letter from the first choice. That was when God showed up with an idea that was never on the table to begin with. You didn't get in to USC because you're not supposed to go to USC." Then there was this profound and pregnant pause. Then, "Oakwood." The voice was so clear and distinct. It was the loudest whisper in the universe. Without any questions, discussion, or hesitation, the train was leaving the station. Mom was shocked, but never questioned it, and just a few months and miracles later, there came the great need for such simple assurance. All of God's biddings are enablings...so then God...enable.

Nevertheless, sticking to the plan of focusing and succeeding on this go-round, the library became a second home and books became a constant companion. For a while all those bad habits of failed tests, unread books, and sub-par writing assignments were unforgiving, but with diligence and prayer God slowly, and carefully crafted a hungry young scholar.

It was still a very uncomfortable place to be. These black people were just different. They assigned a roommate after a few days. The thought came, "Crap, almost made it." This dude was incredibly bourgeoisie, and everyone knows oil and water don't mix. There was one bitter experience that stands out. In the midst of one of those frequent freshman arguments, he blurted out, "You're not college material." Man did it burn, but the truth was his grades weren't quite as good. What he was actually saying was, you're so low-class. It hurt like crazy. God gave comfort in little ways. Divine grace continued to affirm the gifts and abilities of Divine providence.

On one occasion a young kid was walking by with his headphones on and head bobbing. He sung a hymn in church with his sister recently and blew the congregation away. It was obvious that he was listening to rap music, so I inquired. He said he was listening to Nelly. Asking him to trade CDs, he followed me back to my dorm room where he took the Christology album by The Cross Movement's lead artist, Ambassador. He wouldn't give up that Nelly CD though. Years later he said he still owned, listened to, and appreciated the Ambassador CD. Imagine the delight when that same young man went on to win NBC's "The Sing-Off" with five other guys known as "Committed." God affirmed my insight and it was sweet.

Then there came a girl, DJ. One thing that still serves up a smile is the vast amount of pretty girls that paraded around the campus of Oakwood College. Where did all these beautiful and clean women come from? Where's the factory where they make them? There was extra effort to avoid the ones who were too much like the ones back home. With so many good girls around that was easy to do. Sometimes the aggressive girls were hard to avoid, but not too hard. In college you either break somebody's heart, get your heart broken, or both. It's a part of the unspoken curriculum: Heartbreak 101. The beautiful thing was that being in a relationship for nearly the entire undergraduate journey was like a shield from the potentially extreme college girl drama. However, Heartbreak 101 was a tough course and many tests were failed in that class. Thank God for grace.

Meanwhile, all the other tests were fairly easy. Classroom success came at the hands of much hard work and diligence. There's a book that says education is one of the greatest redemptive tools in the hands of God (paraphrased). This couldn't be more

accurate. God used that time to reform and reteach me so many lessons about theology and ministry as well as lessons about life, self, and the world.

One particular lesson that applied specifically to my spiritual life also happened freshman year. This experience would mark my course and direction for future spiritual growth and perspective. On campus there were weekly bible studies that were modeled after the ministry of a pastor with a very troubling trail of spiritual and emotional abuse. What was dangerous theology actually sounded like sweet music to young, impressionable college students. This guy had disciples who worked with him in numerous crusades and came back to school to spread his message.

The studies were informative and passionate, but this beautiful young lady who had a little more personal clout than these passionate young preachers; wasn't as impressed. As a matter of fact she was very suspect. Somehow, the whole thing came to a head in an argument on a Saturday afternoon after church. Her words were piercing and powerful. "The whole (salvation by works) thing is unsustainable." The words still echo as if they were spoken just a second ago. In that moment God set a spiritual precedent. In the months (and even years) that followed, Jesus' life, ministry, death and resurrection became the primary subject of personal devotion time. The goal was to know Jesus intimately and what he required. The alarm rang at 5:30 a.m. daily to start a new journey with Jesus. The gospels were opened and with each story a companion, biography-style commentary entitled *The Desire of Ages*. Having read it for like the third time just last year, it still serves as my all time favorite.

Along the way in undergrad, mentors took special notice and care and provided invaluable insight, wisdom, and opportunities to learn. One mentor and professor gave an

invite to coach a basketball team with him, and to serve as a pastoral intern at his church. Another professor and mentor gave special insight into personal development and scholarship. On one occasion, while consulting with him after class, he said, “You have to stop studying for grades and start studying towards formational learning.” It was a major turning point, committing to learn for the sake of growth instead of attaining academic accolades. The entire experience was one of constant challenge, change, blessing, and growth.

Senior year was fraught with the brunt of the burden of failed tests in that Heartbreak 101 course, but one of the most formational periods nonetheless. After previous summers in the Philly area, the last summer had been spent back home working at the same Boys and Girls Club (BGC) that had been my second home as a kid. By the end of the summer, the unit director had offered an opportunity to return full-time after graduation to help run a new unit for teens. Shortly thereafter the phone rang. It was the head elder from my church back home.

They too were extending an offer to come back and teach at the church’s small school. The call was simply to assess interest levels. Working with community teens in a dynamic environment like the BGC was (by far) a more compelling opportunity. By the end of the school year, the interest assessment from the church had morphed into a definite offer. They scaled the three-step interview process down to one step. It is a very difficult, yet deeply gratifying experience to sit in front of the people who (admittedly) “thought you would have never made it” and to have them pursuing you. God makes liars out of out of men who deny divine power. They were so serious, that they won out. And it all happened just one week before graduation.

An obvious and additional benefit was to come back not as just a teacher, but also as associate pastor of the church; but first, graduation. Graduation was deeply rewarding. After four years of hardness and blessing, to be the first in the family to graduate from college was special. But to do so with multiple academic honors and as a class officer made the experience surreal. However, there was a small dark cloud that hung over the entire weekend. That one last class, Heartbreak 101, was incomplete. She was graduating too, but the bridge had been badly burned. Her mom was convinced that her daughter had a much brighter future. DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince had this song called “Parents Just Don’t Understand.” Boy they were on point, or were they?

After graduation and relocation, the conference required enrollment into teacher’s college for the next few summers between each year of teaching. They granted conditional teaching certification given continued advancement toward a completed teaching degree. More learning. More growth. Teaching was not a welcomed experience but it provided an opportunity to stretch and expand a natural skill-set. Enrolling in this university provided another much needed opportunity for therapy. The staff therapist’s office was a refreshing oasis for a weary traveler. She listened and prodded along the journey of continued self-discovery and healing about past hurts and abuse, the recent relational struggles and transitioning to such uncharted territory. Nevertheless, there was another purpose for pursuing her services.

There were people along the way had always pronounced a type of prophetic promise that Dad would come back. It was a therapeutic word. The previous summer was spent cold-calling lists of men with dad’s name from matches on Google search and people database sites in efforts to find him. My sister and I exhausted this outlet to no

avail. There was one person who seemed a little unsure about whether or not it could be him. He said he was a truck driver in his working years and that he had no kids in South Carolina. Because he was very nice an agreement was made that upon my next visit to see DJ we would meet in person. It was very weird, but a cool experience still. Nevertheless, the mission failed. Now a year later, there was this deep guttural feeling that Dad was close. Yet there was no concrete reason why. It was just a feeling.

The therapist talked about him too. There was one thing she said that resonated deeply; “You need to be prepared to meet him and he be the exact opposite of everything that you always hoped he would be.” Those were deep, yet cleansing waters. It was a much-needed rest stop, and just what the doctor ordered to prep me for this mammoth of a teaching post.

The school at the time was only one room, five grades and seven children. It was the very same school that Mom used as a shield and respite from constant behavioral challenges. The school had lost two teachers from the previous years and a number of students. This was a rebuilding year. As the sole teacher, administrator, and secretary of the school board, there was much work to do and lots more to learn. During this time God taught great lessons about faithfulness with undesirable work, and the grind that excellence in ministry demanded. During that first term DJ was back in the picture, but it soon became crystal clear that this was not going to work.

She sent a long email about concerns of living on a pastor’s salary, and after conferring with mentors it was clear that God was closing the door on that relationship for good. It was a peaceful place. The one annoyingly painful piece was the fact that an airline ticket had already been purchased to visit her for the Christmas holiday. Why

would God allow that money to be wasted if he knew that the relationship would be over just a couple short weeks after?

It was only a few days later that Bernadette called. “Are you sitting down,” she said. “Umm...no.” “Well you need to sit down. You’re not gonna believe this.” She then proceeds to tell the story how she was searching for someone else on classmates[dot]com when she found Dad. Along with his reply to her message, he attached his phone number.” Palpitations were pounding ever so quickly inside my chest. The moment was like time was standing still. Then something interesting happened, dialing the number and getting no answer opened a floodgate of emotions. Every bit of anger, resentment, and disgust that had been repressed sprang up, and lingered all weekend. It turned out that he was in Texas visiting his brother, and at the time he had one of those Metro PCS phones that didn’t provide service outside of Atlanta.

He finally called back on Monday and the conversation lasted for hours. It was a sacred moment. Again, time was standing still and at that moment nothing else mattered. He called again on Tuesday and said that everybody was really excited and wanted meet to me in person. Apparently, the family tradition was to have Christmas breakfast at Grandma’s house. “She wants you to come,” he said. “Where does she live?” was the only plausible question. His reply froze time yet again. “Fort Lauderdale.” Then it became all too clear, God had allowed that ticket because that ticket was never intended for DJ and her family it was for Dad and his family.

A few weeks later Oakwood was holding their annual recruiting event for high school seniors. The church youth group had a couple seniors that really needed to go and be exposed a bit, so the date was set. On the way to Huntsville (Alabama) the caravan

stopped in Atlanta to meet Dad for the first time face-to-face. It was one long hug under that overpass at 2:30 in the morning. The crew crashed for a couple hours at his apartment then it was back on the road for the last leg of the trip. It was church that morning and then that night along came a girl from undergrad days.

She had dated a classmate who also worked in the dorm as an RA. Being the youngest chaperones at an event with hundreds of high schoolers made us get acquainted real fast. She was cool, soft-spoken and very attractive. With all the recent drama, there was no intention to date or be in a relationship, but she insisted on exchanging numbers. Numerous calls were ignored at first. That's sounds bad, but it was just that time alone became more valuable by the day. It was much-needed time to think, work, and do thorough self-evaluation. Soon, missed phone calls turned into friendly conversations, nothing more, nothing less. There were times that she even helped with difficult relationship problems.

When December came, the excitement was mounting to meet the family down in Florida. Stopping in Atlanta to meet Dad was deep, but what made it even deeper was what happened when the caravan stopped on the way back. He said, "Your Grandfather is disappointed that you never came to visit him. He remembers that phone call you made to him. He's really looking forward to meeting you." There are moments when you feel like God is really big and you and the world are really small. This was one of those moments. So by the time Christmas came, the anticipation levels had nearly boiled over.

In the movie "Antwone Fisher" the opening scene ensues with the main character having a dream of finding his real family and there being this giant spread of food with his people welcoming him to sit down and eat. Watching that movie was like wringing

out a wet towel; buckets of tears. The parallel was all too real. But that's exactly what it felt like walking into that house. Life was imitating art; in my case art happened to be imitating my life. Dad's family had this ridiculous spread, and everybody was there. Dad spent the rest of the time skipping all around South Florida making introductions; "This is your cousin. This is your auntie. This is Dillard High. This is where you get the best that and the best this." He was great. Then to Grandad's house. He pulled out these giant photo albums and said, "This is my diary son." Surprisingly, it was filled with pictures of women and children from those women. "Wow!" Everything is starting to make so much sense now.

Grandad was married six times by the time he died. He had women all over the country, and children with a good number of them. The actual number of children was unclear. The official count was said to be somewhere around the mid twenties. As the old cliché goes, "If you don't know your history, you're bound to repeat it." After my visit to Grandpa's house my history lesson was complete, and in this case it was best to let the past remain in the past. The only photo albums at 2511 Tree Knoll Court are the ones from December 18, 2005—the day Tracy Harris became Tracy Thompson. Thank God for Tracy.

There was a beautiful spread on that Christmas day in Florida, but no Christmas gifts. Another birthday had come and gone without so much as a hello from anybody, and having reached home deepened my feelings of loneliness. After all, those people in Florida were indeed my family it was just still difficult to not identify with them on a purely superficial level. It became clear that God kept Dad and Grandad away for obvious reasons. Grandad had spent five years in prison after shooting this woman in the

face for...brace yourself...cheating on him. Dad was in major transition after having recently been laid off from Morris Brown and losing everything in a divorce a couple years prior. This was just not a place that could be all that comfortable. The Lord had already carved out a totally different path and purpose. It was already well underway, but what now?

Reaching home was relieving, albeit lonely, but checking the post office mailbox proved to unleash the most delightful surprise. In the mail was a “care package” from Tracy that included two classic movies (“Singin’ in the Rain” and “12 Angry Men”), and a card with a really corny joke; all of which were things of great personal interest. Moments like this one were hard to come by, so the post office became a makeshift sanctuary where the moment was cherished and enjoyed. A little old white lady was totally caught off guard by such random exuberance, but was still happy to share the moment. It immediately became apparent that there was something more here that needed to be cherished, and for the first time the idea really began to become real. Then the thoughts began to circulate. Why was there no one else who thought enough to buy a Christmas or birthday gift? These types of gifts never mattered so much, but now, in this moment, they mattered a whole lot. Apparently, for them, there wasn’t much to celebrate. Maybe they felt that they hadn’t been given good enough reason to celebrate. But Tracy did, and so the world stopped.

The following events happened very quickly. Within a few months, wedding plans were already being made. A ring was purchased, a joint bank account was opened and numerous California to Carolina flights were booked for numerous months in advance. Rapid movements were a personal common-practice, but for her this was

different. She did (and still does) nothing without doing one thousand Google searches, reading all the consumer reports and all of the customer reviews. Having such a levelheaded cosigner was and still is one of the greatest life-blessings. God looked beyond all of my faults and met my deepest needs. Support, affirmation, patience, discernment and nurture, all found their home in her.

A classmate had given good counsel before this relationship began to develop saying, “God gave Adam a job to do, and then He brought him Eve. You need to focus on the job He gave you.” And true to form as soon as the focus was shifted to the assignment, God formed Eve and presented her while Adam was totally oblivious to what was going on. She has been the truest representation of a help-meet; the rib that was removed and reformed into an amazing companion and life-partner. It has been almost ten years since she came walking down the center aisle of that pretty little church in San Antonio with her arm locked with her dad’s. It has been a sweet ten years filled with celebration and turmoil, challenges and triumphs, changes and transitions; and it seemed like all these things happened immediately and all at the same time.

The reception was over and people were still standing around when a former professor and personal mentor, Dr. James Doggette, who had been invited to officiate the wedding, extended me an invitation to return with him to his church and serve on the pastoral staff to help start and run a school at the church. The timing couldn’t have been better or worse all at the same time. The brand new family home had just been purchased and preparations were being made to add a garage to the property. However, the school board had been thoroughly readied after numerous recommendations to restructure the operating system of the school. Those recommendations had been largely disregarded. It

was a sort of impasse. These were changes that needed to be made in order for the school to go to the next level, but they were unable to take the journey, and thus this was a parting of ways.

It quickly became apparent to us that this was an open door, an invitation, to begin a new life and a new ministry. But to outsiders, this was crazy. “Why would you leave a good job, and a brand new house in your hometown to go after something that you don’t even know is a sure thing?” There were numerous detractors, some of which were truly wise individuals. Nevertheless, it was indeed a call from God and with it came great uncertainty. The house had lots of nibbles, but no actual bites on the line. It wasn’t until the moving truck was being loaded the day before the big move, that there was a contract on the house. Praise the Lord!

Moving to Huntsville was a very difficult transition. It turned out that the naysayers were partially right. The job at the school turned out to be a miss. The school development committee turned out to be a very political bunch with a totally different agenda than the pastor. Bowing out seemed to be the wisest move so that the school issues didn’t compromise my standing on the church ministry team. The problem was that the arrangement was designed to combine a part-time stipend from the pastoral staff position with the school post to meet complete salary and living expenses. Having bowed out of the school post made the income really tight. This became really hard, really fast. Tracy was able to find a job as a foster parent recruiter with a private firm, but financially things were not how they were in South Carolina. The financial challenges exposed each of the financial shortcomings that had been festering between us.

Everyone has seen that scene in the movie where the guy's credit card is declined. The waiter tries to break the news in a discreet and compassionate manner, but the customer is a real jerk. His flippant response is dismissive and disrespectful, and he tells the waiter, "Scan it again." The waiter comes back and much to the customer's embarrassment, and disappointment, the waiter reports, "I'm sorry sir, I tried to run it numerous times but it keeps coming back declined." It was during this season that this scene came to life; but in reality, it was in a department store. After this I was clear that finances were a major problem area. It was one more thing that made this new environment and new set of responsibilities so much more challenging.

A minor depression set in. Money troubles, failed vocational plans, newlywed adjustments, pending home sale, insecurity about the future, and so much more seemed to be piling up and becoming unbearable. It was hard to get out of the bed in the morning. It seemed similar to a Hebrew wilderness experience. What was the purpose of being in this place? Why would God do this? The answer would soon rise to the surface.

Truth is, this short year and a half was the most enjoyable stint in ministry to date. God was careful to teach the value of team ministry and synergy. A staff of eight pastors made collaboration essential, but also highlighted the fact that each pastor had been given his/her own unique passion and area of giftedness. Synergy was a part of the culture and it was a thoroughly productive and rich environment. After years of fighting the conviction for a few years, Huntsville provided me the perfect opportunity to write my very first book. Another great benefit during this season was the opportunity to continue coaching. Some of the same students on the academy team in middle school were now juniors and seniors in high school. Seeing them grow as young men and ball players was

rewarding. Some of them even went on to play college ball. It's a proud moment to know that you coached a young man when he was just learning the rudiments of the game.

It also was deeply formational in that it informed hunches and convictions within me about our community's need for and means of mentoring. So many young people feel like the church is detached and irrelevant. Being with them so often made speaking their language essential. Reality is it wasn't hard because there was so much in them that was so brutally familiar. The creative ministry of coaching a young men's basketball team came in great use shortly thereafter. Dr. Doggette, saw the internal struggle and took it upon himself to provide some encouragement. "You're a pastor, and you got *it*," he said. He then, picked up the phone, called the conference president, and suggested that a small country church nearby be added to his large church as a district. The president thought it was an answer to prayer because Triana's sister church had just written him a letter requesting their own pastor.

In short order, the plans were made and the installation date was set. The president came and introduced Dr. Doggette and then to everybody's surprise (except maybe the two of them), he introduced me as well—full bio and all. People were confused, but Dr. Doggette cleared the air when he left right after making a few comments. It was obvious in that moment who would be the actual pastor, because the installation sermon still had to be given. The arrangement was difficult given that there some very strong personalities in leadership, but it didn't last long. There was another call that came from the Allegheny West Conference. A struggling church plant in Pittsburgh needed a pastor. Initially I saw the opportunity to pastor a failing church plant

as an invitation to die, but the benefits of full-time pastoral employment appeared to make it worthwhile. Additionally, it was obvious that this was what Dr. Doggette had envisioned from the beginning.

His advice on moving to the church plant was potent. He said, “Don’t get too comfortable. It is your responsibility to provide for the family. Our wives should only have to work if they choose to.” In other words, he was clearly saying, you will accept this call. He was overwhelmingly supportive throughout the entire interview, review, and transition process. Drawing on his investment was essential because Pittsburgh was hard. Pittsburgh had a great number of churches, but few churchgoers.

There were some young guys in the neighborhood who were obviously a part of a gang. Obviously in middle school and consumed with street life, they celebrated New Year’s Eve drinking Grey Goose, smoking weed, and cursing like OGs at the basketball court. Basketball was an easy bridge; the rest was not so easy. An organized team that travelled to play other conference churches was a big draw, but again the challenge to connect them to church life was great.

The tipping point came after a little girl was shot just a few blocks from the church. It turned out that she was the niece of one of the church members. The neighborhood kids came in droves to her funeral. I asked myself, why don’t they come to church? The answer was simple, because any other time church ignored them. To make a long story short, there were numerous methods employed with little resources in an effort to make a big impact. Basketball tournaments, assistance for young single moms, drug dealer/drug user counseling, volunteer mentoring at the local community center, and on and on, all in an attempt to meet the people where they were. Unfortunately, the church

was still too far for most of them to travel. It was too far separated from the everyday place where the people actually lived. After all, in the words of Jay-Z and Kanye West, “There’s no church in the wild.” To make matters worse, the conference administration often seemed to hinder creative ministry.

One administrator said, “You’re doing a lot of good things, but you gotta do the things that are measurable.” A new president brought added strain. Referring to same old methods that urban unchurched folks spurned “You gotta do both and,” he followed up that conversation by adding a second church to the district. Another administrator added, “You gotta work smarter not harder.” He followed up that conversation by sending a set of Xerox copied bible studies and guaranteeing that they would multiply the church’s membership easily. It was literally hilarious. Why do people who know nothing about the context assume that they have all of the answers to the church’s problems?

The newly assigned church was resistant to the new arrangement. They wanted things to stay as they were, but the president had pledged to the sister church that they would have their own pastor. Resentment and bitterness set in and relationships with administrators were strained. God used this time to teach me a litany of valuable lessons: A wise man holds his tongue when he knows his words will not be fruitful; forgiveness is for your own freedom more so than the freedom of the one who harmed you; unwarranted curses are blessings in disguise. There were so many more, but those three best encapsulate them all. It might be helpful to add here that as of last month, a new president restored the original district alignment, and closed the inner-city church plant. That hurt. All of the blood, sweat, and tears seemed to have been ignored. That’s painful.

In the midst of all of this mess was even more pain. A new member, a young lady in her twenties committed suicide while dealing with some personal issues. This was extra hard because I had been the one to counsel and marry she and her husband. A year later (and without the other's knowledge), they had each come back to ask for counseling and guidance. He came first on a Friday. Then, she came the following Tuesday. After listening to the both of them, it was obvious that they both loved each other, and were indeed dealing with serious issues, but had no real resources to draw support and direction from. A few days later she shot herself in the stomach. It appeared she was trying to kill her four-month-old unborn baby. For some reason, she was convinced that he didn't want the baby. She was wrong.

It happened in the wee hours of the morning on a Saturday, and despite the fact that divine service was fast approaching, the 1:30 phone call wasn't alarming in the sense of sleep. What was alarming was who was on the other end and what he was saying. The worship service was riddled with tears. After the eulogy at her funeral, one older pastor who had often been the source of contention with the difficult administrators said, "I see why you've been having so much trouble; you're gifted." There was no fitting response to give, thus no response was given. It was really hard. It was almost impossible not to think that it was partly my fault. The enemy comes to make you feel guilty, and he flooded my mind with every "should've, could've, would've" scenario you could imagine.

Who would believe that God would use this terribly difficult tragedy as preparation for the hardest funeral ever? Less than four months later a member was having surgery at the very same hospital where the family had assembled to identify the

young mother's body. The information they gave was incorrect which led to lots of time for quiet reflection at an hour so early that not even the nurses were at the hospital. After standing there for an hour or so, it became evident that this was not merely the same hospital of the terrible tragedy a few months prior, but it was also the same floor, same wing, same elevators, same lobby, same everything where the family had assembled to wail the pain away.

God how did you get us through this? was the question that came to mind as the entire experience was relived in high-definition detail. After a few hours at the hospital, the family bed was calling loudly. A rare late morning nap lasted the entire day. Waking up in a huff and panic the inner alarm was blaring about a meeting that was scheduled at the church. With only a few minutes to get ready that missed call would have to wait. It's like that time when God told Elijah, "Sleep for the journey is too much for you." That call was too much to handle. The meeting started and was almost over when Sharhonda, a cousin from Fort Lauderdale, called. After closing out the meeting, and returning the call, she was obviously crying. "I'm so sorry Chris." "What are you talking about Sharhonda?"

Apparently, she was the one deputized to break the news that Dad had committed suicide. As it turned out, that missed call was from Dad's oldest daughter Brandy calling at the moment when she walked into her apartment and found his bleeding body. Now Sharhonda and Dad's adopted daughter Kareisha had their own lists of should've, could've, would've. No need for those; an enemy had done this. He had battled a drug addiction for a number of years, he had been recently divorced, lost everything in a fire, lost his job when the university lost their accreditation, lost his father, a pending civil suit

with the university, more failed relationships, and then got married again to a very unstable woman. No need for regrets and guilt, he had a lot on his plate, and some depression medication to make the cocktail complete.

If only there was more time. There was so much more to learn from him. With a Masters degree in history, he was wealth of information. He understood the world and politics. There was so much more to find out. What really happened when you went to Beirut? What was your relationship with your dad like? What exactly happened when you came back from the war? What exactly did you learn at the pentagon that made you so cynical? But, time was up, and it hurt. Unlike the young lady who had committed suicide, this time there was a strange peace. It was a blessing to have met him and build such a special bond with him. This was it, so I took the good with the bad and moved on. This was growth.

The funeral was in Florida, and while throughout the whole ordeal, there was a whole lot of thinking going on. He always said he wanted to get his doctorate. Now that goal must be passed on to the next generation. There was this book idea about Proverbs that had been simmering, and now it was how it needed to be written. It became apparent that the book of Proverbs is actually a story about a father giving wisdom to his son. Bingo! It must be an actual story of a father and son, and it will be dedicated to him. Also, running had become a rediscovered outlet to relieve stress and stay in shape. A friend suggested an upcoming marathon and the idea bounced around, but now it was fully embraced as a way to honor Dad. 2011 was bittersweet. He committed suicide in January, just after New Years. But the remainder of the year was spent, running, writing, and healing.

In August Jessica's son Justin came to stay for the school year. With him came more lessons of mentoring, rap music, and anger management. He also gave great inspiration for the book. By the end of the year, the president saw fit to fix a mistake and cover administrative shortcomings with a transfer. The transfer was to a large church as an associate pastor. He brazenly said, "You need to learn the fundamentals." Meanwhile, other senior pastors (whom he wanted to do this training) were left scratching their heads trying to understand. It was meant to be a silencing demotion, for insubordination, and failure, but in actuality, it was a promotion. It opened the door for two more books to be published, multiple periodical writing appointments, connections toward enrollment in a doctoral program, and countless other opportunities for personal and professional development. Weeks later he resigned. No love lost; only lessons learned. It is true that what Satan meant for bad, God meant for good. The Divine hand has always been faithful in this way. Now the goal is to be faithful in return.

Church Context

From January 2012 to November 2014 I served as the associate pastor of the Ephesus Seventh-day Adventist Church in Columbus, OH. Ephesus is a 104 year-old, traditional, black, institutional-style church. A large church with a complex network of deep family ties and lineages, Ephesus was established in 1911 and continues to be one of the largest churches in the Allegheny West Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. The unofficial story, as was told by one of the senior members, was that a small black family went to visit the local Adventist church made up of all whites. Much to their surprise, the whites offered to buy them land and space so they could have their own church, and so

Ephesus was born. Whether the story is true or not, the fact that it is still passed on represents (in part) the embedded identity of an institution, and how such images and sentiments can linger.

Profile & History

According to the official history, two families and a total of five people were the first members that began meeting in the home of one of the families. In those days the denominational structure was dominated by Caucasian leadership, thus the church received less than the best administrative and pastoral support. Within ten years the church acquired property but was forced to move due to the construction of a new city street. The Great Depression years made it difficult to handle debts incurred by the emergency move, but the church survived. The 1940's and 1950's saw rapid growth due to the reorganization of denominational leadership that led to the establishment of black "regional" conferences. With black leadership and black conferences there came increased oversight and greater administrative and pastoral support. However, the church was forced to move again in the sixties to make room for a highway.¹

The church is currently situated on the corner of Sunbury and McCutcheon Roads in a neighborhood now known as Easton (after the Easton Town Center Shopping Mall). To long-time residents of Columbus, Ohio the neighborhood is known as Mifflin. The current sanctuary seats approximately 600 members, which is roughly the weekly attendance. The sanctuary was constructed in 1987 under the leadership of Pastor Walter

¹ Valerie Lee, *Ephesus: 100 Years of Ministry* (Columbus, OH: Ephesus Seventh-Day Adventist Church, 2011).

Wright. Before this location the church owned a sanctuary just minutes way on 5th Avenue. When the church was forced to move there, they had no intention of staying, because the sanctuary was “already too small.”²

Ephesus is generally made up of middle-class black families. Many of them, well-educated professionals, are also life-long/multi-generational Adventists. Ephesus boasts of its numerous doctors, lawyers, accountants, college professors, university administrators and other various executives and high-ranking professionals. Composed of families, Ephesus has a large number of teens and children along with a considerably large number of young adult professionals as well. This is due to the life and work of the late, great Dr. Frank W. Hale.

Dr. Hale was a long time member of Ephesus, having moved to Columbus to join the faculty of the Ohio State University in 1971. Dr. Hale had previously served as president of the Seventh-day Adventist HBCU Oakwood College (now Oakwood University). He rose the ranks of Ohio State until becoming vice provost and chief diversity officer. The work of Dr. Hale in establishing extensive scholarship and grant programs made Ohio State the top US school for awarding doctoral degrees to African-Americans.³ Not surprisingly, many of them were Seventh-day Adventists; and even more specifically, graduates of Dr. Hale’s Oakwood. Ephesus SDA maintains the indelible stamp of Dr. Hale’s legacy. There are a number of students, faculty, staff, and

² Ibid.

³ Ohio State University, “Obituary: Frank W. Hale,” From Woody's Couch: Our Playbook on OSU History, June 28, 2011, accessed April 17, 2013, <http://library.osu.edu/blogs/archives/2011/07/28/obituary-frank-w-hale-jr/>.

alumni of Ohio State who are in regular attendance. Even the successor of the very position he held is a committed member.

Ephesus is known as “the flagship” church of the Allegheny West Conference of Seventh-day Adventists. It is the largest church within the conference in terms of attendance and tithing. The current senior pastor has nearly thirty years of ministerial experience, was a conference administrator, and holds a Doctor of Ministry degree from United Theological Seminary. The previous pastor also holds a doctorate from United, and currently serves as the conference president. As a matter of fact, the list of past pastors is a veritable who’s who of well-known SDA pastors past and present.

Numerous former pastors have held advanced and terminal degrees. A few have been internationally recognized and sought after preachers. One such preacher, Charles D. Brooks (1957-1960) was the speaker for a telecast that aired regularly on BET. Therefore, Ephesus has long been known as a place with a powerful pulpit.

The fact that Ephesus is a family church is evidenced even in the history of former pastors. The first pastor, Jeter Cox, served the church from 1911-1917. Then, from 1917-1924 his brother, Leon Cox served as the pastor. Also, in 1972-1976 Henry Wright served as the pastor. Six years later, his uncle, Walter Wright became the pastor.

Instruction

Preaching is of primal significance to Ephesians as it is to most Seventh-day Adventists. The sermon is the center of the worship experience usually lasting up to an hour in length. It is also the center of the evangelization strategies. In an effort to make a major evangelistic thrust, the pastor or a visiting pastor will usually construct the program

around at least three weeks of preaching. To aid in major evangelistic thrusts pastors often recruit “Bible Workers” to canvass the area, and offer bible studies to willing residents. Also, the weekly prayer meeting, usually features a message of some kind lasting anywhere from fifteen to thirty minutes.

Ephesians also cherish a commitment to Bible Study. The weekly Saturday morning divine service is preceded by an hour-long bible study time known as Sabbath School. Adult members utilize bible study guide booklets that are published by the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists each quarter. There are also study guides for five additional age groupings from college students all the way down to toddlers.

On Sabbath evening, youth normally gather again for a youth program (called Adventist Youth Society or AYS) that usually takes the form of an informal worship service that is supplemented by some teaching component. One recent AYS brought by the church education committee featured a panel discussion on finding scholarships for college. Another recent AYS brought by the church Pathfinder club, featured a lecture about stars where members of the club could earn the stars honor badge.

Pathfinders is a co-ed youth leadership development club closely akin to Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts. Pathfinders meet regularly during the school year to receive instruction and training in areas such as camping, leadership, Bible, drill team, drum corps, etc. Pathfinders often travel to club camping trips, conference, regional, national, and worldwide camporees, drill competitions, etc. At each grade/age level there is a corresponding pathfinder class wherein the pathfinder receives a workbook that includes comprehensive coursework. The levels span from Friend at age 10/grade 5 and span to

Guide for age 16/grade 10. After which, high school juniors and seniors can train to become junior leaders. After serving as junior leaders, the highest level is Master Guide.

In keeping with its commitment to education, Ephesus also boasts of their junior academy and preschool. The preschool, Precious Jewels Early Learning Center (PJELC), currently has twenty-three students enrolled ages three to five. There are two teachers, two assistant teachers, and two foster grandmothers from the Foster Grandparent Program of HandsOn in Central Ohio. There is also a full-time salaried director. PJELC is only a few years old and has struggled to manage its own growth. They temporarily operate in the church building utilizing two classrooms which are normally used for children's Sabbath School; while nap time is held in the space which (on the weekend) functions as an overflow seating area for the sanctuary.

The church's school board serves as the governing body for the preschool and the academy. The board is currently brainstorming and planning ways to handle the lack of classroom space. The current plan is to build an additional wing onto the existing school building to house the program. With both the academy and preschool sharing space the past few years, and both schools attendance growing to the extent of a waitlist, the church school finds such expansion necessary.

Tensions mounted until finally the current principal's desires won out. One could almost argue that it was almost like an eviction. Meanwhile, the director of the preschool protests since her program is the one with the greater growth rate, and growth potential. She also argues that a majority of her students are private pay as opposed to Title XX—A state program with the Ohio Department of Job and Family Services that assists families who are unable to maintain the costs of quality childcare.

On the other hand, the academy, Columbus Adventist Academy (CAA) at the time of this study had nearly one hundred-five students enrolled from kindergarten to eighth grade. A rough estimate suggests that the majority of the student body received assistance from the state's EdChoice program. EdChoice, like Title XX for the preschool, ensures that families that live in districts with failing schools have access to private and charter schools despite personal financial constraints.

CAA has six full-time teachers and an administrative and support staff of about fifteen. Kindergarten, first grade, and second grade all have a full-time teacher. The other three teachers each have two grades housed in their classroom. Third and fourth are classed together. Fifth and sixth are housed together. And then, seventh and eighth are housed together as well. The upper grades (fifth through eighth) operate on a homeroom system. The fifth and sixth grade teacher instructs all four grades in language arts, and the seventh and eighth grade teacher instructs all four grades in math and science. Both teachers instruct their homeroom classes in social studies and bible.

There is a full-time principal, an administrative assistant, a part-time business manager (who also serves PJELC), about three resource/enrichment aides, one teacher's aide, about three Foster Grandparents (from HandsOn Central Ohio), one janitor, one roving volunteer, and two or three people who are contracted to provide lunch services.

The school board is comprised of approximately twelve business and educational professionals along with the two pastors acting in a type of advisory role. Around the table are at least three terminal degrees, a former political aide, and a few business owners. The principal of CAA, the director of PJELC, a staff member, and a parent all sit on this board. It is indeed a very capable group of individuals. A committee of church

members selects school board members during the bi-annual church officers selection process.

Ephesus is unique in that, in the SDA church school system every church in the surrounding area that is a part of that schools conference of churches is invited and encouraged to support the school as a constituent. The church will then offer each church a spot on the school board. Ephesus does not follow this practice. There are about eight AWC churches in the Columbus area, but none of them are constituents of the school. It is simply incidental that one of the Teachers is a member of an area church, and one of the resource aides (who also sits on the board) is a member of another one of the churches.

Enculturation

The commitment to education is also evidenced by the annual graduation service. The academy and preschool do hold regular graduation services for their students, but in addition to this, the church holds a commencement service for all of its student members on every level of matriculation and study. From preschool to Ph.D., students dress in full academic regalia and any member with any level college degree is invited to dress and march as faculty for the event. It's a very impressive service. Students receive monetary gift awards and some have the opportunity to share testimonies about their experiences. It really speaks to the deep commitment to education and personal development that permeates the church.

It's often been said that the longer a person remains a Seventh-day Adventist, the greater will be their social and economic advancement. It's possible that that same

statement could be made about a number of different denominations, but it is definitely true about Seventh-day Adventists.

Ephesus is also a church that thrives on fellowship. There are numerous church potlucks where members will stay to eat and talk for hours on end. When there is not an official church potluck, there is often numerous “unofficial potlucks” where numerous members gather amongst various homes of members to spend quality time with those within a tighter circle. New members are often welcomed to these sorts of gatherings to meet other members and their families and friends.

Aside from potlucks, another way that fellowship is expressed is during the actual divine worship service. At welcome time, the pastor welcomes the visitors while church elders pass out a welcome package to give information about the church. Then the pastor invites members to greet members and visitors seated around them. This has the tendency to take a long time. Members obviously take advantage of the opportunity to visit with family and friends that they haven’t seen all week. They get up walk around, and engage in rousing conversations. It’s actually fairly comical to observe. After the divine service, members will often hang around the church in the parking lot, throughout the corridors and sanctuary. It truly is a family church.

Another prevailing tradition at Ephesus is communion. Communion is a very sacred event. Unlike many churches that hold communion every month, or even everyday, most SDA churches celebrate communion once every quarter. Communion consists of a foot-washing service and partaking of the emblems of bread and (unfermented) wine.

As a family church, Ephesus has quite a few family reunion style events. The deacons and deaconesses day (also known as the harvest celebration) is always in the spirit of thanksgiving and remembrance. A guest speaker that is specifically from the church's former days is normally invited to address the congregation over an entire weekend. Closely related to this event is an annual homecoming service where members who have moved away are all invited to join in a family reunion style worship weekend. Former members from all over the country will descend on Columbus to celebrate this event. The weekend also features a fundraiser for an education scholarship fund named in the honor of a well-loved deceased member.

Ephesus also holds a strong legacy of evangelism and outreach. As does most SDA churches, Ephesus conducts numerous public evangelism and outreach events each year. Along with the evangelistic campaigns mentioned earlier, the church engages in community outreach events like block parties, health fairs, blood drives, and food drives. Blood drives are usually quarterly and are conducted by the American Red Cross. Food drives are usually coordinated around the Thanksgiving holiday. The community service department will use the donated food to organize food baskets for needy families. Health fairs and block parties are usually held annually. Community residents are welcomed to enjoy a day filled with food, fun, and informative activities. It's probably safe to say that aside from CAA, the outreach events are the church's strongest expressions of community investment.

Socialization

SDAs are general fairly insular people. One reason is because the church has long held strong standards concerning entertainment. SDAs are normally not club goers, smokers, or drinkers. And in the past SDAs were even discouraged from attending movie theaters. This narrows weekend plan options down quite a bit. Thus SDAs in general, and Ephesians in particular pretty much stick to themselves. Family and friends, at home, behind closed doors. That's pretty much it. This has far reaching implications for our concepts of internal and external socialization.

When it comes to internal social dynamics Ephesus is a family church, so they love to visit and greet, but it's easy to mingle and greet when everyone sitting around you is a family member (whether immediate or distant). There is one particular pew (and a few seats surrounding it) that is regularly consumed with three generations of one family. It's rare for a member to walk from one end of the church to the other to greet a stranger. Generally, members greet their own friends and family.

In the same way, when it comes to socializing new members and visitors, the same method applies. One must be previously connected to an inside group, or either receive a personal invite into one's inner sanctum of friends and family. Then they would be invited to these private potlucks, Saturday evening get-togethers and such. It might be helpful to add that the more prominent the members of the group, the less likely new members will be welcomed. Generally, highly respected groups are closed groups.

Furthermore, recreation times are generally spent with family members and small circles of friends, playing card games (older members) or watching movies and playing

video games (younger members). In times past churches would have “socials” where church members would get together on a Saturday night after a day filled with worship services and celebrate with food, games, and fellowship. These types of get-togethers are pretty much non-existent these days. One long-standing social activity is weekly basketball games during the winter months. Ephesus has three teams: junior, teen and men. The junior and teen teams often have a few girls on the roster. The teams travel to play other churches from across the (Allegheny West) conference. It’s common to hear someone commenting on the old basketball days when the gym was packed to capacity and the team was highly competitive. Nowadays, games are poorly attended and competition is the least impressive.

There is a sense of secular social/community engagement at the hands of members who are required to do so on their jobs. Nevertheless, Ephesus seems to follow the normal trend in that SDAs are normally not very socially engaged/active with the wider secular community.

There is one notable group that represents more of the established, committed, senior members of the church. The Good Samaritan Club is well over thirty years old and was started by a few couples that wanted to have a strategic way of helping needy families. The group is made up of members and a few former members all of which are in their sixties or older (most of them being older). The group operates independently of the church but was started by committed members of the church, thus in reality might be considered a ministry of the church. They meet regularly and pay club dues, which serves as the fund from which assistance is given. They also hold regular get-togethers and events for the sake of fellowship and recreation. Given the fact that it is a club, it is

exclusive by nature. But still represents in part the type of exclusivity that brews in this sort of church. It might not be considered negative, but exclusive nonetheless.

Formation

Closely related to the issues of socialization are those of formation. The discipling of new members depends heavily on the development of relationships within the church family. However, with such great challenges in the area of socialization, new members have a much greater challenge assimilating into the group. Few members often exhibit a greater capacity for welcoming new members, yet each person's circle has natural limitations for connectedness; thus the challenge persists.

Ephesus also has eleven elders that serve as spiritual leaders over specified portions of the congregation. Parishes are organized by grouping various letters of the alphabet. One elder may have the letters H, B, S. Every member with a last name that starts with one of those letters will make up one parish. Each member then has the responsibility of providing pastoral care, spiritual leadership and support to those within his/her parish. However, elders often struggle to make contact with parish members on a regular basis. As difficult as it seems to regularly communicate with fifty to one hundred different members, it becomes even more difficult to add one more to that list and provide that same level of service to them as well. New people are harder to serve. They demand more attention and often times more work.

The ministry of the interest committee also supports new members. This team is primarily responsible for following up with people we know are interested in joining the church. Nevertheless, when these people finally join the interest committee still seeks to

engage with them in an effort to help them to assimilate to their new family and the Christian life. In the past this has been the work of a two-woman crew (who once served as elders). However, they have recently sought to strengthen their ranks and improve their team in order to serve the members better.

In addition to the myriad of events and programs, there are some groups that also aid in the relationship building and discipling process. Both the women's ministry and men's ministry departments have thriving ministries. The men's ministry hosts a regular bible study and prayer meeting on Friday nights. The guys get together to talk, share, connect and pray for each other. The men have also organized an annual men's retreat that's more than twenty years old. The event is a concentrated time of sharing, growing, and therapeutic support for the men. The ladies on the other hand, have regular events, outings, programs, and activities to invest in the lives of women. They too hold an annual conference where they deal more directly with women's issues. Both of these groups seek to connect members with each other and with valuable resources for growth.

Secular Context

As mentioned earlier, the church is situated on the corner of Sunbury and McCutcheon roads on the borders of Mifflin Township and the city of Columbus. It is at this very point that McCutcheon road becomes Innis road. Unofficially, this neighborhood has become known as Easton, after a major shopping and business center in the area called Easton Town Center.

Easton

Located almost exactly one mile from the church is Easton Town Center and shopping district. Easton was founded by billionaire businessman Les Wexner and developed by partnerships between Wexner's Limited Brands company, along with various development and architectural firms; including investment by Arnold Schwarzenegger. Over the span of about twenty years this 1300-acre commercial mega center was constructed to include major department stores, discount stores, banking and business headquarters, luxury apartments, luxury car dealerships, a sports complex, hotels, and more. It appears to be one of the first of these sort of live, work, eat, play, shop developments that have sprung up around the US over the past fifteen years or so.⁴

Mifflin/43219

Despite the recent development of the powerhouse that is Easton, the residential side of this region known as Mifflin has maintained it's quiet, homely persona. Mifflin Township is home to approximately 35,000 Ohioans. Just as in any other major urban area, the neighborhood boundary lines are complex. Zip code where the church is located (43219) includes Mifflin Township as well as the city of Columbus. One might wonder why/how do these distinctions matter at all. The median income of the zip code is just under \$38,000 a year, while median income for Franklin County is around \$47,000 a year.⁵ In 2010 35.6% of the people living in 43219 were living below the poverty line.⁶

⁴ Dees Stribling, "Leaders of the Pack: Easton Town Center Is Emulated the World Over," *Shopping Centers Today*, May 2011, 21.

Mifflin and the surrounding area is a house-hunter's haven. The area is dotted with subdivisions and apartment complexes. Quiet, family-oriented neighborhoods make it the family-friendly for parents trying to raise children. The business that Easton has brought to the area has led to the construction of numerous new developments.

The 43219 zip code is home to one public high school, 5 elementary schools and 1 middle school. However, the school landscape is complex because the state's EdChoice program has breathed life into the private and charter school institutions.⁷ Therefore, there are numerous competitors to the local public schools. This region is also home to many churches, and even quite a few megachurches. Right next door to Mifflin is the City of Columbus.

Columbus

Although the Columbus metro area is ranked third, Columbus is the largest city in the state of Ohio. With over 750,000 residents it makes its city limits twice the (population) size of both Cincinnati and Cleveland. Columbus is the state capital and thus boasts a highly political landscape with lots of state government jobs and even a strong federal presence. Columbus is ranked, featured and celebrated in numerous best lists. Among the most notable: world's most intelligent cities, ten best big cities, and America's most educated cities.⁸

⁵ "Franklin County, Ohio (Oh)," City Data, accessed July 23, 2013, http://www.city-data.com/county/Franklin_County-OH.html.

⁶ "43219 Zip Code Detailed Profile," City Data, accessed July 23, 2013, <http://www.city-data.com/zip/43219.html>.

⁷ Matthew Carr, "The Impact of Ohio's Edchoice On Traditional Public School Performance," *Cato Journal* 31, no. 2 (May 2011): 257-84.

Columbus has been celebrated for a diverse economy, which was able to remain stable throughout the recent recession. The most vibrant sectors of the economy are made up of numerous industry powerhouses that find their home in the city: education (Ohio State University), banking (Chase bank), insurance (Nationwide Insurance), energy (American Electric Power), retail (Big Lots), along with numerous others.⁹

A diverse economy manifests itself in the unemployment rate as well. While the nations unemployment rate hovers around just over seven percent, Columbus sits at six percent even.¹⁰ However, Columbus appears to have a serious problem with poverty. In 2009 the national percentage of people living below the poverty line was just under fifteen percent. However, Columbus' percentage was more than twenty-seven.¹¹ In addition, the 2009 national percentage of blacks in poverty was 25.8, while in Columbus it was 33. Crime in Columbus is also a major concern. The crime rate in Columbus is double the national average in every category.¹² There must to be direct relationship between the crime rate and the poverty rate.

⁸ Lucas Sullivan, "Group Names Columbus One of the Most Intelligent Cities," *Columbus Dispatch*, January 24, 2013. Also in *CNN Money Magazine*, Best Places to Live, 2006, 1, accessed July 23, 2013, http://money.cnn.com/popups/2006/moneymag/bplive_2006/frameset.2.1.exclude.html. Also see "America's Most Literate Cities 2008," Central Connecticut State University, 2008, accessed July 23, 2013, <http://web.ccsu.edu/americasmostliteratecities/AMLC08/default.htm>.

⁹ Christine Dugas, "Diverse Economy Helped Columbus, OH in Downturn," *USA Today*, July 27, 2010, accessed July 23, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/money/economy/housing/closetohome/2010-07-27-realestate27_ST_N.htm?csp=34.

¹⁰ United States Department of Labor, "Local Area Unemployment Statistics," Bureau of Labor and Statistics, May, 2013, accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.bls.gov/web/metro/laummtrk.htm>.

¹¹ "Columbus, Ohio (Oh) Poverty Rate Data," City Data, accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.city-data.com/poverty/poverty-Columbus-Ohio.html>.

¹² "Crime Rate in Columbus, Ohio (Oh)," City Data, accessed July 24, 2013, <http://www.city-data.com/crime/crime-Columbus-Ohio.html>.

The city has two major league professional sports teams in hockey and soccer. The Columbus Blue Jackets are a sub-par hockey team in the National Hockey league and the Columbus Crew are the only team with a soccer-only arena in Major League Soccer (MLS). They also won the MLS Cup in 2008. Nevertheless, Columbus has a vibrant sports community thanks to the overwhelming popularity of the Ohio State Buckeyes. Whether it's Ohio State football or basketball, the airwaves are always aflame with a constant stream of updates and info about the university's sports. And for good reason, Ohio State has a legacy of numerous conference and national championships.

After reviewing all of the data and information, it's become even more apparent that this is "good land." Ephesus has its challenges, but it is a good church. The church is filled with resources and committed and capable people. The church is also on the move with a growing school and pending expansion projects. In the same way Columbus has it's challenges just the same, but it is indeed a good city. It's a great place to live and a great place to do ministry. There are the difficulties that come with living in any major city, yet these are the very issues that the church was called and instituted to address and redeem.

Kurtley Knight is a long-time friend, classmate and colleague who has some very strong views about old churches. He often says, "We ought to let churches die." It's a very strong statement yet, his point is clear. Church growth specialist, Gary McIntosh once gave a seminar to the pastors of the Allegheny West Conference where he argued that churches often begin to die long before they even realize it. He argues this concept further in the book, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*. He also suggests that the existence of churches mirrors the life cycle of a human being. After about fifty years they

begin to break down.¹³ If this is true centenarian-type churches are simply surviving by God's grace and mercy. And they (as do all centenarians) should count every day above ground as a direct blessing from the Lord. Ephesus is that centenarian church, and thus should really begin to consider ways to redefine and recast its vision for ministry and mission in the community.

According to longstanding lay leaders, over the past one hundred and two years Ephesus has birthed three churches. While this may be sufficient for the typical human being, a church that wields the influence and resource base as that of an Ephesus must be much more productive. Ephesus must plant more churches. Or at least provide strategic ministries in targeted communities to meet specific needs in an effort to grow the current church body.

Also, Ephesus is in a crisis of youth ministry and youth engagement. Members with teenage children and those who work with the youth lament that they know the youth attend the constant regimen of bland programming because they are forced to, not because they are engaged. Also, the young adults have all but checked out. Their attendance is sporadic and spotty. They are totally absent at just about every event and program other than divine worship, and they are generally uninvolved in the various ministries of the church.

One might contend that young adults are busy building their careers and personal lives, yet studies show that they are thoroughly engaged with causes and any authentic

¹³ Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 66.

undertaking that interests them and the ones they love.¹⁴ They're big on relationships and authentic, cultural and communal ties that bind them to the ones around them. They are lovers and feelers, doers and workers. They are busy making a difference in the world, but whether they go to church or not doesn't make a difference. It's a ministerial stale mate.

Another author who tackles this great issue is Ed Stetzer. In his book *Lost and Found*, he contends that a church that wants to engage young adults must create a worship experience that reflects the cultural context.¹⁵ He also speaks of eight additional keys to growing a church that transforms the lives of young adults. If the church doesn't reflect the culture of it's own young adult members, then it definitely won't attempt to reflect the culture of the unchurched young adults in its parish.

One particular area where I believe that church can focus attention and resources in a way that will engage youth, recast vision to galvanize the laypeople, target specific communities and possibly even plant a church is with intentional and strategic ministry to Hip-Hop culture. There are neighborhoods that are closely adjoined to the one where Ephesus Church is located. Logistically, it would not be hard at all to focus our attentions there (where the people are). However, the true challenge is to shift our approach and methods to meet them where they live in terms of values, customs and mores.

The church has a certain order and culture of its own that is often opposed and even hostile to the culture(s) of poor, black and unchurched people that surround us. We

¹⁴ Aly Hawkins, David Kinnaman, *You Lost Me: Why Young Christians Are Leaving Church-- and Rethinking Faith*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2011.

¹⁵ Ed Stetzer, Richie Stanley, and Jason Hayes, *Lost and Found: the Younger Unchurched and the Churches That Reach Them* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2009), 143.

are generally, middle-class, educated professionals. Members often pride themselves that they don't engage in violence, smoking, drinking, partying, drug abuse, crime, and the like. The lives of church folk are generally clean and orderly. Furthermore, church itself is generally a clean and orderly place (especially at Ephesus). Church is fairly predictable, controlled, peaceful, and quiet place (except during the praise songs). We would rather not soil ourselves with such hard and dirty work as dealing with people's messiness.

However, when we are committed to ministering to those around us it is required that we do some extent of dirty work. Those whose lives are characterized by crime, violence, drug abuse, poverty, and a litany of other devastating circumstances are the very ones who have constituted the heart of Hip-Hop culture from its very inception. It was the deprived environment of Bronx housing projects where the particular elements of the culture first began to synthesize. Young poor blacks took the old turntables and records from their parents' collections and made a new form of music. They took cardboard boxes and made a dance floor. They took the broken down playgrounds and courtyards of the projects and made a safe dance hall. And they did all of this in the midst of the decadence and depravity. And while the community was breaking down around them they committed and focused on making beautiful art and music.

It is this culture that has become the heartbeat of poor oppressed people in urban (and even suburban) centers. Hip-Hop culture embodies and informs the language, the music, the fashion, the relationship to government and law enforcement, and the order of life in general. And given that poor, oppressed people often take desperate measures to

reach desired ends, this often leads to the various challenges that clean, orderly, professional church folk hate to be bothered with.

Hip-Hop culture (as does any other foreign group), forces us to listen closely. We are forced to listen closely in order to hear the heart and pathos of those among us who have suffered most. Most members of Ephesus haven't the slightest idea what it's like to grow up in such depraved circumstances. Thus, Hip-Hop educates Ephesus (and the rest of the world) about what deep the pains of poverty look like on a daily basis. Listening provides information for various opportunities and avenues for ministry.

A close listening to Hip-Hop culture provides insight about the pain that comes from injustice in the legal system, school system and various other streams of society. It provides information about broken homes and broken relationships that persistently plague urban communities due to mass incarcerations and policies that threaten marriage. Hip-Hop provides information about gangsterism and violence that is simply a continuation of the violence that was wreaked against the Bronx by the Cross Bronx Expressway in the late forties and early sixties.¹⁶ It's the same violence that was leveled against African slaves and Native American peoples in early America. It is the same violence that was piled onto African-Americans during the civil rights era. Ghetto communities simply continue that bloody legacy. Hip-Hop is brutally honest about that violence and the perpetuation of it.¹⁷ Hip-Hop provides insight into the systemic

¹⁶ Jeff Chang and D.J. Kool Herc, *Can't Stop Won't Stop: a History of the Hip-Hop Generation*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Picador, 2005), 11.

¹⁷ Becky Blanchard, "The Social Significance of Rap" (paper published on Stanford University online journal for a course called EDGE: ethics of development in a global environment, Stanford, CA, July 26, 1999), accessed August 21, 2013, http://www.stanford.edu/class/e297c/poverty_prejudice/mediarace/socialsignificance.htm.

depression plaguing ghetto communities, which is a response to the political and economic pressure that prevails against their people and places where they live. Hip-Hop will light the path to countless avenues for ministry, if only the church might learn how to listen.

What makes this issue even more complex is the growth and expansion of Hip-Hop culture. This year, Hip-Hop turned forty years old, which means that the last two generations have been deeply influenced by this way of life. And despite the decadence in the inner city and ghetto communities, Hip-Hop has grown up and matured in as many ways as it has perpetuated the brokenness and pain that it protested against. Hip-Hop scholars and activist have taken Hip-Hop style and values into boardrooms, university lecture halls, courtrooms, and more. Will the church utilize those virtues that these young leaders hold dear for the sake of ministry to Hip-Hop culture?

The church has long held a commitment to justice, relationships, reconciliation, peace, love and countless other related principles. Why not capitalize on one more context where these values might be expressed in refreshing and redemptive ways? At the very outset of the book *Churches that Make a Difference*, Dr. Ron Sider outlines the characteristics of “the holistic church”—one that, “develops a holistic perspective on evangelism and social ministry and describes how they can be interwoven.”¹⁸ The problem with lots of Seventh-day Adventist (SDA) churches (including Ephesus) is that the various aspects of evangelism, social action, worship, etc., are disjointed parts of the whole. These parts have never been naturally interwoven into our customs and modes of

¹⁸ Ronald J. Sider, Philip N. Olson, and Heidi Rolland Unruh, *Churches That Make a Difference: Reaching Your Community with Good News and Good Works* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2002), 15.

operation. Evangelism is just one of the things we do. It's an event, not a way of life. So then, the community of faith never really thought to connect worship to evangelism, and evangelism to social action, and social action to community development, and community development to reconciliation. Hip-Hop in the urban/suburban context is the perfect opportunity to reaffirm such values (and others) while ministering healing and grace to people in a holistic fashion.

Again, the challenge lies in being willing to shift methods and traditions in order to meet the current pressing needs. There are numerous ordinances and practices that could possibly be remodeled in an effort to communicate these values in contextually relevant ways. Take for instance communion. Everybody in the ghetto can relate to a cookout. Is there a way to utilize a familial/community gathering like a cookout and utilize it to communicate the ordinance of communion? Or consider another common church practice like collecting offering. How might the concepts of social economy, stewardship and generosity be expressed in an urban ghetto arrayed with the elements Hip-Hop culture?

One problem is, we have assigned concrete spiritual significance to concepts and images that are cultural in nature. Culture itself is not spiritual. Cultural images and elements can be utilized for spiritual purposes, but they are not spiritual in and of themselves. So in settings where certain elements of culture are not present there is a great frustration; especially if you're a member of Ephesus. If there is no pulpit, giant cross, steeple, or pews, then it must not be a church. There is a great need for flexibility to utilize the images and elements that are present in order to bring about reconciliation, redemption and spiritual growth.

The intended goal is not to build a church house, but rather to expand the kingdom of God through investing in the lives of people who need the to see the power of the gospel at work. Maybe the best effort would be to establish a nonprofit organization of some sort that is designed to address an immediate need in a culturally relevant way. With the mass incarceration epidemic that has ransacked our communities, more and more young black males are going away to prison. The recidivism rate is alarming because there is nowhere for them to go and thrive when they are released. Why not start a job training and unemployment facility that specializes in the reentry process? To meet this type of an immediate need in the black community would have earth-shaking generational impact. It is the very work that Christ himself would have engaged in had he been on earth today.

As mentioned earlier, a methodological shift is essential also because we are at a major point of crisis when it comes to engaging our youth. The youth are becoming increasingly disengaged. They show little signs of orientation to the Christian lifestyle. Part of problem seems to stem from this idea that the church ignores them except for when the adults want something from them. What's interesting about this idea is that there is a lot of programming that is directed to/for the youth. Yet, the youth seem ambivalent towards it.

Their world is one that has been deeply influenced by Hip-Hop and pop culture. All (or at least most) of the images that are dear to them are adopted from those worlds. And even if they grew up in a Christian home, they have spent their entire lives being indoctrinated by the likes of BET, MTV, YouTube, Pandora, Facebook, Twitter, and all the rest. Church has tried to paint for them a world that (as they see it) does not exist.

This isn't working. On the other hand, the church should probably attempt to move into their world and attempt to create meaning within the context that they have become comfortable with.

To illustrate, imagine a young adult getting a call from mom begging him to come back home and move back in with her and his dad because they miss him and they're concerned about him. It's almost laughable because there's no way that a young adult, excited about the future, and the new possibilities, will make that choice. On the other hand, the parents would do well to go for a visit, take housewarming gifts, family photos, and maybe even cook a meal. Then the concern might be received more openly and appreciatively. However, the church has refused to visit the place where the young people live because it's in a bad neighborhood.

On the other hand, many of our Ephesus youth grew up in good neighborhoods and stable homes, but they relate to Hip-Hop culture closely for a number of reasons. Hip-Hop has always been characterized by a violent honesty and bare-it-all authenticity. On the other hand, the youth feel like the church is filled with fakers, phonies and hypocrites. What's ironic about this is that Hip-Hop has as a sort of basic ground rule that faking is not allowed. So even in instances where there have been some phonies that snuck in the back door, Hip-Hop has an internal auditing system that consistently balances the books. Just ask Vanilla Ice.¹⁹ There is also a great bit of emphasis placed on relationships.

¹⁹ *Vanilla Ice - Biography*, in the Biography.com, accessed August 28, 2013, <http://www.biography.com/people/vanilla-ice-454718?page=1>.

Hip-Hop often portrays a sort of Hallmark for broken relationships and how (not) to conduct oneself relationally. Yet, this, in part is due to the fact that the Hip-Hop generation is comprised of a vast multitude of youth and young adults who didn't have positive relationships, and strong bonds modeled for them.²⁰ Also, the past two generations have suffered epidemic divorce rates. Thus, they relate deeply with the relational brokenness and maleficence that Hip-Hop expresses.

Another major connection that Ephesus youth have with Hip-Hop is that they feel imprisoned. Now this one is a bit more complex. Hip-Hop has deep obvious issues with freedom and imprisonment given the rapid outgrowth of mass incarceration coupled with prison-like living conditions in the urban centers. Add to that the sense of restriction (as opposed to intellectual liberation) that stems from failing school system, the targeting and over-punishing leveled against at-risk children, and you have yourself the perfect recipe for a deep sense of imprisonment. Ephesus youth on the other hand (and SDA youth in general) often express a sense of imprisonment to the countless rules, standards, and strict values of the church and their parents. They embrace the rebellion that they hear in the music without necessarily being able to relate to the direct source or motivation of that rebellion.

Teenagers are working hard to establish a strong sense of being and identity. This too is one of the cries of Hip-Hop. One evidence of this is in the proliferation of tattoo culture within Hip-Hop. Tattoos are a form of silent protest—a type of self-imposed

²⁰ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation: Young Blacks and the Crisis in African-American Culture* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2003).

public promotion of a reinvented identity.²¹ In a recent bible study class, one teenager asked, “Is it wrong to get a tattoo?” It’s a common question that (for church youth) relates directly to the issue of imprisonment. Yet, it also speaks to their desire to control and determine their identity. They want to be seen and heard, yet they feel they that the powers that be virtually ignore them except to order them around or chide them in some manner.

In the book *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, Bakari Kitwana discusses these as well as a litany of other reasons ideas for such a deep affinity for Hip-Hop culture by youth who don’t necessarily share similar experience.²² It’s amazing how these vastly different groups hold so much in common. Yet he argues, “The one hope of saving the country could be simply listening to our young people.”²³ The challenge again lies in the church’s willingness to listen.

And this is where the challenge for this research project lies—helping the church to listen. In a recent video panel discussion Lester Collins, PhD student at the University of Texas Arlington commented, “We’re not just talking about music, we’re talking about people, and all people need to be embraced.”²⁴ It was closely akin to what Dr. Albert Mosley said in his sermon at United Theological Seminary entitled “Distorted Vision.”

²¹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), 103.

²² Bakari Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop: Wankstas, Wiggers, Wannabes, and the New Reality of Race in America*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 3.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

²⁴ Christopher Thompson, “Why We Need Hip-Hop” (video), June 13, 2013, 58:40, accessed September 9, 2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=epef6YDP2gw>.

He argues, “They see people, but they really don’t see people.”²⁵ There is a great need to train church leaders to see other groups of people. And with seeing other groups comes listening to them. The church must learn to hear Hip-Hop culture. The great need is to help them understand this way of life that the youth and community around them are so deeply engrossed in. This is a type of cultural sensitivity training in preparation for missional service. Yet, this is no small task.

Initially, the idea was to include only the church elders (lay-leaders who serve as a type of under-shepherd to the pastor). However, the church has layers of leadership and influence. Nothing happens that does not first meet the approval of the “powers that be.” Thus, sessions must include a wider swath of stakeholders and influencers. The mission then is to gather these power brokers for interactive training sessions that will inform, equip, and motivate them for ministry.

Leaders will engage in a six-session course that will cover the particulars of the culture such as; Hip-Hop history and origins, important figures and influencers in Hip-Hop, expansion of Hip-Hop culture in business, media and around the world, along with sociopolitical and socioeconomic issues surrounding Hip-Hop elements and values. Sessions will also explore biblical themes in rap music (in particular) and Hip-Hop (in general), Hip-Hop values that parallel Christian values, along with possible hermeneutical bridges that undergird redemptive action. Leaders will be tested at the beginning and end of the training course to assess their understanding of Hip-Hop

²⁵ Albert Mosely, “Distorted Vision” (Video of sermon, Precious Blood Catholic Church (United Theological Seminary DMin intensive), Trotwood, OH, August 19, 2013), accessed September 9, 2013, http://www.livestream.com/unitedts/video?clipId=pla_5df30170-9da6-4e39-973b-4598404ec8ed&utm_source=lslibrary&utm_medium=ui-thumb.

concepts and issues. The course will include PowerPoint presentations, discussions, lectures, and will be supplemented by further independent reading material, videos and documentaries to be viewed during and between sessions.

This project affords the perfect intersection of gifts, interests, experiences, and contextual characteristics and issues. The writing gift will be utilized in the design and development of a curriculum for the course. The teaching gift will be utilized in the actual instruction process. Pastoral care gifts will be demonstrated in that the course provides immediate occasion to shepherd leaders toward greater personal growth through teaching experience. The Hip-Hop and black urban center are specified as the demographic of primary focus given thorough understanding with cultural norms, values and challenges within the group. Furthermore, the aforementioned needs of missional focus and direction for the ageing church (Ephesus) provide substantive exigence.

A recent *USA Today* article reported that Seventh-day Adventism is the fastest growing American denomination. However, at a 2.5% growth rate, the number is nothing to celebrate. As a matter of fact, the article listed quotes from SDA denominational leaders who candidly revealed that the church is growing twice as fast overseas and most of the growth in the states actually comes from the immigrant groups.²⁶ So in reality, SDAs aren't really growing the fastest, but rather dying the slowest. The stat represents our great need to look seek out creative approaches to fulfilling the great commission. Here's to hoping the leaders embrace this as one more fresh and promising idea.

²⁶ G. Jeffrey MacDonald, "Adventists' Back-to-basics Faith Is Fastest Growing U.S. Church," *USA Today*, March 17, 2011, accessed September 9, 2013, http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/religion/2011-03-18-Adventists_17_ST_N.htm.

CHAPTER TWO

BIBLICAL FOUNDATIONS

Old Testament: Isaiah 56:1-8

The name Isaiah means “Yahweh saves.” This is significant given the impending destruction coming upon the people of God. Salvation and deliverance was exactly what they needed. Isaiah was called “Prince of the prophets.” He spoke of Uzziah as though he was closely related to him. Also, his access to Hezekiah seemed freer than what was common with other prophets. Thus some scholars believe that he was of royal ancestry; possibly even a cousin of Uzziah.¹ Educated and well-known, Isaiah was among the Hebrew elite. Demonstrating a deep and abiding commitment to the call of God, scholars suggest that Is. 6 describes his call to ministry, which manifested a deep and spiritual sense of divine responsibility from which he never departed. Though we know little to nothing of his wife from the biblical text, even the names of two of his sons made manifest in his prophetic commission. Naming them Shear-Jashub (which means “a remnant will return”) and Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz (meaning “swift is the plunder, speedy is the prey”) displayed Isaiah’s belief in God’s divine judgment and salvation for the chosen people. Isaiah spent three years naked as an acted prophecy of the coming judgment of God against Egypt (20:1-6). This same level of undying commitment proved

¹ Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Book of Isaiah: a Historical and Theological Survey* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 24.

to be the cause of his supposed martyrdom at the hands of the wicked king Manasseh.² Isaiah established a longstanding legacy of faithfulness to God's call and an authentic integrity to legitimize the divine pronouncements to God's people.

The book of Isaiah was often called "The Little Canon" not simply because of its sixty-six chapters, but also because its divisions and movement seemed to mirror that of the Old Testament (OT) and New Testament (NT). The first section of Isaiah is separated into thirty-nine divisions just like the OT, while the second section, like the NT, is separated into twenty-seven divisions. Despite a longstanding debate about authorship related to the content, style, and language of the two divisions, Isaiah displayed "many evidences of unity" and coherence.³

Isaiah is a complex book with deep contrasts. It is prophecy of epic and apocalyptic proportions with deep political implications. Both foretelling and forth telling outline the demise of God's people in the northern kingdom of Israel to Assyrian domination, pronouncing the impending doom for Judah in the south by conquest and captivity at the hands of the Babylonians. At the same time it promised the destruction of those very kingdoms and all those who dishonored God. It continued on to promise restoration for "the remnant," along with an invitation for other nations to join in this new kingdom to be established. Despite their rebellion and disobedience God reserved a place amongst "the chosen" for all of those who accepted the divine will. This was the basic outline and structure of Isaiah.

² Ibid., 26.

³ Francis D. Nichol, ed., "Isaiah," in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1977), 488.

The first half of the book (chs. 1-39) focused on God's guarantee of judgment. The first six chapters focused on the sins of the chosen people. The northern kingdom was under the immediate threat of destruction because of their gross infidelity against God, while Judah is being warned to learn from the missteps of their sister nation. Chapters seven through thirty-five outline God's judgment to fall on all other nations who persisted in wickedness, rebellion, and injustice. Chapters thirty-six through thirty-nine contained a brief interlude where preservation from Assyria was promised to King Hezekiah and Judah. Nevertheless, Babylon came as a result of divine judgment. This dark harrowing word concluded throughout the first part of the book, preparing the way for melodic promises and proclamations of peace and providence (chs. 40-66).⁴ The first nine chapters (40-48), identified as the second section, focused on the children of Israel. There was specific focus on the promised deliverer. The book finally closed with promises of the complete restoration of the Kingdom of God and even the entire world. It was here that "foreigners" were included in God's grand restoration. Whoever desired to keep God's will and "commit themselves to the Lord" were welcome to the table of God's eternal blessing.

The expansive historical context that was treated in Isaiah's vision led to extensive debate concerning its date, authorship, audience and historical context. Beyond the debate, it was clear which dates were relevant to the study of the text. For the purpose of this study, the historical context to be primarily addressed is that of the pre-exilic period with reference to the exile and post-exilic period as well. The apocalyptic

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1992), 265.

references of Isaiah will also inform the application of the text to the contemporary context.

Despite the dispute, there was a great deal of historical ground to cover concerning the context that the book of Isaiah identified. The introduction of the book stated that Isaiah saw a vision “concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.”⁵ The political and spiritual climate of Judah under the leadership of these four regents provided a wealth of contextual clarity. They reigned during what proved to be the eve of great political upheaval and tumultuous change, in that “shortly after [was] the history of three great empires in succession.”⁶ It would also be their faith and obedience (or lack thereof) that proved to determine their fate. At this point in the history of Israel and Judah the moral and spiritual climate had reached an all-time low. Speaking specifically of the northern kingdom concerning this tumultuous era Ellen White comments:

The closing years of the ill-fated kingdom of Israel were marked with violence and bloodshed such had never been witnessed even in the worst periods of strife and unrest under the house of Ahab. For two-centuries and more the rulers of the ten tribes had been sowing the wind; now they were reaping the whirlwind. King after king was assassinated to make way for others ambitious to rule...every principle of justice was set aside; those who should have stood before the nations of the earth as the depositories of divine grace, ‘dealt treacherously against the Lord’ and with one another” (Hosea 5:7).⁷

⁵ Isa. 1:1 NRSV

⁶ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 257.

⁷ Ellen G. White, *Prophets and Kings* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 1917), 279. White’s quotation includes a portion of Hosea 5:7.

God's grace had reached its limit and there must be recompense. Meanwhile in the southern kingdom, conditions weren't much more respectable. Uzziah (or Azariah) was classified (in 2 Kings 15) as a righteous king for the majority of his reign, yet it was his brazen act of disrespect for the temple when he entered and offered incense that resulted in an immediate act of divine judgment. God struck him with leprosy and he served in seclusion in co-regency with his son Jotham until he died in 739 BCE.⁸⁹ Ellen White added, "Many of the evils which were hastening the swift destruction of the northern kingdom and had recently been denounced in unmistakable terms by Hosea and Amos, were fast corrupting the kingdom of Judah."¹⁰ It was during this particular time (745 BCE) that a new king, Tiglath-Pileaser III, ascended to the throne of Assyria and "inaugurated a new period of Assyrian aggressiveness that was to continue right up until the final disappearance of the Assyrian Empire a century and a quarter later."¹¹ It was apparent that Judah was soon to confront divine judgment.

Jotham's reign only lasted for about eight years after his father Uzziah died, and seemed to have "handed over the reins of effective government to his son Ahaz" years before he actually died.¹² Yet, it was Ahaz that proved to plunge the nation further into depths of degradation. Ahaz, remembered in the biblical record as quite possibly the most

⁸ 2 Kings 15:5

⁹ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 246.

¹⁰ White, *Prophets and Kings*, 306.

¹¹ John Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary: from Biblical Text- to Contemporary Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 20.

¹² Frank E. Gaebelin, ed., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Isaiah, Jeremiah, Lamentations, Ezekiel) (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1986), 5.

depraved of Judah's kings, practiced some of the most grotesque forms of false worship sacrificing his own son to the Assyrian gods.¹³ The biblical record suggested (and commentators seem to agree) that the nations at risk of invasion by the surging Assyrians created a coalition to stave off defeat.¹⁴ Ahaz declined the invitation to this multinational defense team and as a result Rezin of Syria and Pekah of Israel proceed to attack Judah. In an act of risky defiance, Ahaz sought support from the ferocious Tiglath-Pileasar. In *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, Gleason Archer suggested that, "Judah under the corrupt and degenerate King Ahaz, seemed ready to follow Israel's dismal example of apostasy, and looked to pagan Assyria for deliverance..."¹⁵ Ahaz's political plotting from a logical perspective was genius, yet it manifested the very lack of faith and obedience for which Judah was condemned.

Joseph Jensen agreed that, "Hezekiah was much more interested in independence than in continued submission. His preparations for revolt were careful and far-ranging. An important element was his religious reform..."¹⁶ Merrill added, "The result was a religious reformation the like of which Judah had not seen in all her history and would never see again."¹⁷ Nevertheless, Hezekiah's reign presented a precarious challenge. Christopher Seitz highlighted this tension in that despite his righteous inclinations,

¹³ 2 Kings 16:3

¹⁴ Gaebelin, *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 5.

¹⁵ Gleason L. Archer Jr., "Isaiah," in *The Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 19th ed., ed. Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison (1962; repr., Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1981), 605-54.

¹⁶ Joseph Jensen, *Isaiah 1-39* (Wilmington, DE.: Michael Glazier, 1984), 25.

¹⁷ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 258.

Hezekiah still submitted to Sennacharib's levy in 2 Kings 18.¹⁸ Hezekiah goes to the extent of stripping the gold from the temple in order to meet the claim of the Assyrian monarch.¹⁹ The expected instability of the kingdom in the midst of a regime change presented the perfect opportunity to renege against the Assyrian tax. Yet, Sennacharib's response was one of unmistakable intentions. Wanting to destroy Jerusalem, Hezekiah wanted to exemplify the consequences rendered on an entire coalition that leagued together against him.²⁰ God answered Hezekiah's plea for help with a sweeping visitation in the middle of the night upon Sennacharib's army, yet it was Hezekiah's pronouncements that secured the fate of Judah.

It happened before the siege of Sennacharib when he was stricken with a life-threatening illness. Hezekiah prayed and the Lord delivered him with the promise of fifteen additional years of life. The signal of the promise was to be reversed by the shadow on the sundial. Shortly thereafter, Merodachbaladan sent a convoy to visit Hezekiah. On the surface, the visit was in an effort to extend his well-wishes from one respectable ruler to another. Merrill's survey suggested that the visit was also intended to garner support for his own plans of rebellion against Assyria.²¹ Instead of opening the Babylonian purview to the power of God and the working of grace and providence, Hezekiah foolishly paraded the cohort around the palace and boasted about his own

¹⁸ Christopher R. Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1993), 13.

¹⁹ 2 Kings 18:15-16

²⁰ Oswalt, *Isaiah: The NIV Application Commentary*, 24.

²¹ Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 260.

wealth.²² It was this account and the following exchange with Isaiah the sealed the doom of Judah, and served as a type of interlude to the first and second half of the biblical book of Isaiah. Seitz added, “The grim prophetic word foretells Babylonian exile, if not of the royal line itself.”²³

God was not pleased and Isaiah was the one delivering the divine declaration. In the prophecy, God was presented as The Righteous Judge, the executer of justice and peace, and the one who brings salvation and restoration. Israel was set aside to be a “priestly kingdom,” yet they had squandered their royal birthright and soiled their priestly robes in doldrums of idolatry, immorality, and injustice.²⁴ Now, the King had returned to mete out the just recompense.

Israel was once “full of justice,” but now they must “seek” for it.²⁵ It was lost. The rulers and priests forgot their responsibility to champion the cause of justice and righteousness. God “expected justice, but saw bloodshed;” and therefore challenged them, “What do you mean by crushing my people, by grinding the face of the poor?...”²⁶ They have greedily added “house to house...field to field, until there is room for no one...”²⁷ There was trouble on every side as the nations were in the midst of upheaval and change, yet Israel found hope and peace in faithful obedience and trust in the

²² 2 Kings 20:12-18

²³ Seitz, *Isaiah 1-39*, 14.

²⁴ Exodus 19:6 NRSV

²⁵ Isaiah 5:7; 1:21, 17 NRSV

²⁶ Isaiah 3:15 NRSV

²⁷ Isaiah 5:8 NRSV

Almighty King. It was God who delivered peace; for he indeed was the “Prince of Peace,” and “His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace...”²⁸

The problem was, “There is no peace, says my God for the wicked.”²⁹ Hence, it was their disobedience and lack of trust that caused them to forfeit the benefit of God’s peace and protection. On the other hand, it was also the other wicked nations that were ineligible to receive the blessing of peace; for they too dishonored God. God promised to “punish the arrogant boasting of the King of Assyria,” “And Babylon... will be like Sodom and Gomorrah...”³⁰ But that’s not all. “Melt in fear, O Philistia,” “Moab is undone,” “Damascus will cease to be a city,” and “so shall the king of Assyria lead away the Egyptians as captives and the Ethiopians as exiles...”³¹ God’s promise was that wickedness would not go unpunished. “For the Lord is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter.”³² The Holy One of Israel must execute just recompense for injustice and evil.

The phrase Holy One of Israel (and variants of it) was used nearly thirty times in Isaiah. There were only seven similar examples of it elsewhere in the OT. Isaiah obviously sought to contrast the complete perfection of the character of God against the gross rebellion and wickedness in Israel, Judah, and the surrounding nations. John Goldingay added, “It is hardly coincidence that in his vision in chapter 6 Isaiah himself

²⁸ Isaiah 9:6b-7a NRSV

²⁹ Isaiah 48:22; 57:21

³⁰ Isaiah 10:12; 13:19

³¹ Isaiah 14:31; 15:1; 17:1; 20:4

³² Isaiah 34:2 NRSV

had heard the seraphim proclaiming ‘Holy Holy, holy, is Almighty Yahweh.’ The entire book works out the implications of that vision.”³³ With those implications crystal clear, holiness is juxtaposed against might and power beside the concept of the Holy One of Israel in the phrase Lord of hosts.

Not only was God the Holy One of Israel, but also the Lord of Hosts, or Captain of the Armies of Heaven. The phrases “Lord of hosts” and “Lord God of hosts” were used sixty times in Isaiah. While this phrase was much more commonly used in the OT than Holy One of Israel, its prominence in Isaiah provided insight into the writer’s intent. The Lord of hosts was truly sovereign of all creation with the entire host of heaven ready to obey any and every divine directive. Yahweh was holy, with no intention to clear to the guilty. Yet, Yahweh also wielded limitless power and exercised authority to execute righteous judgment and take the place as rightful ruler and sole sovereign.

It was the Holy One of Israel, the Lord of hosts who called Judah and the surrounding nations to task and stripped them of the spoils of the oppressive exploits.³⁴ The Lord of hosts “rises to argue his case; he stands to judge the peoples. The Lord enters into judgment with the elders and princes of his people...”³⁵ This Righteous Judge executed judgment against Judah when he removed the hedge that protected them, broke down their walls, commanded rain clouds to hold back the rain, caused fire to devour their stubble, made their roots rot, and caused their blossoms to dry up.³⁶ It almost

³³ John Goldingay, *New International Biblical Commentary: Isaiah (NIBC, 13)*, 1ST ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2002), 7.

³⁴ Isaiah 3:18-25

³⁵ Isaiah 3:13-14

sounded like an egomaniacal pronouncement when God said, “‘Now I will arise,’ says the Lord, ‘now I will lift myself up; now I will be exalted.’”³⁷ Yet, the reality was, it was indeed The Holy One of Israel who speaking with words promising peace, redemption and salvation. It was clear that the fullness of justice culminated in the establishment of a new kingdom where justice, peace and righteousness prevailed.

It was the Lord of hosts who promised that “Zion shall be redeemed by justice...”³⁸ And even in the midst of the threat of destruction and despair promised the coming of the abiding presence of the Almighty (in Immanuel) and to “keep him in perfect peace, whose mind is stayed on you, because he trusts in you.”³⁹ The promise again was to establish a renewed kingdom when, “the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a fest of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.”⁴⁰

The image of this new king who would “establish and uphold” this new kingdom “with justice and with righteousness” forever became the centerpiece of what was otherwise a harrowing and depressing prophecy. Yet, “he is named Wonderful Counselor, Everlasting Father, Prince, and we need not worry because the entire government is the burden he carries on his broad shoulders.”⁴¹ He brought “justice to the nations,” bore our

³⁶ Isaiah 5:5-6; 24

³⁷ Isaiah 33:10 NRSV

³⁸ Isaiah 1:27a NRSV

³⁹ Isaiah 7:14; 26:3 NKJV

⁴⁰ Isaiah 25:6 NRSV

⁴¹ Isaiah 9:7, 6

infirmities and diseases, was “wounded for our transgressions and crushed for our iniquities,” brought “good news to the oppressed,” bound “up the brokenhearted,” “proclaim[ed] liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners,” and established a new temple as “a house of prayer for all peoples.”⁴²

It was possibly in chapter fifty-six where this new kingdom took on the most clear and vivid imagery; specifically verses one through eight.

*Thus says the Lord: Maintain justice, and do what is right, for soon my salvation will come, and my deliverance be revealed. Happy is the mortal who does this, the one who holds it fast, who keeps the sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil. Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, “The Lord will surely separate me from his people”; and do not let the eunuch say, “I am just a dry tree.” For thus says the Lord: To the eunuchs who keep my sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant, I will give, in my house and within my walls, a monument and a name better than sons and daughters; I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. And the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord, to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants, all who keep the sabbath, and do not profane it, and hold fast my covenant—these I will bring to my holy mountain, and make them joyful in my house of prayer; their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar; for my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, I will gather others to them besides those already gathered.*⁴³

It was evident that the text was an admonition: a type of recipe for righteous and faithfulness in the restored kingdom.⁴⁴ If Israel did as Yahweh prescribed then all will be

⁴² Isaiah 42:1; 53:4-5; 61:1, 56:7

⁴³ Isaiah 56:1-8 NRSV

⁴⁴ Paul D. Hanson, *Isaiah 40-66* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 1995), 193.

well with their people. God through the prophet Isaiah outlined several significant commands and promises as well as a few reforms that were keys to their prosperity.

Foreigner

The concept of the accepted foreigner was the first of major reforms. Foreigners were one of two groups of people who were not permitted entry into the temple of the Lord.⁴⁵ The original law concerning this issue was located in Deuteronomy 23 wherein God commanded, “No Ammonite or Moabite shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord. Even to the tenth generation, none of their descendants shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.”⁴⁶ According to Deuteronomy, Egypt and Edom were not grouped given deep historical connections that existed between Israel and those groups. Yet, others, foreigners were excluded to “the tenth generation.”

The Hebrew word נֶכָר (nekar) occurred thirty-five times in the OT and had shades of meaning that were fairly narrow. Usually referring to people from a far away country, the word might also refer to a foreign/strange land or strange God. Yet there was also a negative connotation with the word. The *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon* added that the word “sometimes (suggests) an additional notion of hostility.”⁴⁷ Israel was warned that foreigners were corrupt, blemished, that they go “whoring after other gods,” that they

⁴⁵ Ibid., 194.

⁴⁶ Deuteronomy 23:3 NRSV

⁴⁷ *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, in the Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 5, 2014, <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strongs=H5236&t=KJV>.

will be afraid and fade away, etc.⁴⁸ Thus, Israel might naturally be suspect of any suggestion of a relationship that should promote any level of equity between the two groups. Suddenly God determined to change policy. The foreigners were accepted as if they kept the divine covenant and lived righteously.

Eunuchs

Closely related to that of the foreigner was the plight of the eunuch. They were the other group mentioned in Deuteronomy 23. “No one whose testicles are crushed or whose penis is cut off shall be admitted to the assembly of the Lord.” The command was plain, yet the sociopolitical construct was one that was far more complicated than that of the foreigner. The Hebrew word קָרִיץ (*cariyc*) was mentioned forty-two times in the OT. The word was often translated “officer” or “chamberlain,” pointing to the political contexts that surrounded the word. It appeared that every use of the word served to illustrate a political setting.

Cariyc was used to describe the Pharaoh’s officer Potiphar, officers in the courts of the kings of Israel, chamberlains in the court of Ahasureus, servants in Nebuchadnezzar’s court, and so on. The word simply meant one who was castrated. Thus in every case the word was used it referred to servants of a monarch who was relegated to service by extreme measures. It was meant to signify faithfulness to the king or kingdom. Eunuchs were usually servants or guards of a king’s harem.

Furthermore, one can’t ignore the obvious socioeconomic implications that were involved. Most eunuchs were selected from impoverished classes. It was surprising to

⁴⁸ Leviticus 22:25, Deuteronomy 31:6, Psalm 18:45

find nobles in such a predicament except in cases where they were captive; Daniel serving in the courts of Babylon was an example of this. All in all, the state of the eunuch was a result of political oppression and conquest so they lived a life imposed upon them by the Empire.

Sabbath

With the Sabbath, Yahweh simply reinforced a value that was critical to Israel's worldview. In fact, שַׁבָּת (*shabbath*) was established at the end of the creation week serving as a central principle for this chosen people of God. *Shabbath* was mentioned 108 times in the OT and was used to refer to the weekly seventh-day Sabbath, as well as the annual feast days and the sabbatical year.⁴⁹ Interesting to note here was that the pericope made similar distinctions; specifically in vv. 2, 4.

The Sabbath was one of the central symbols of God's creative and redeeming work. For God proclaimed, "Therefore the Israelites shall keep the sabbath, observing the sabbath throughout their generations, as a perpetual covenant. It is a sign for ever between me and the people of Israel that in six days the Lord made heaven and earth, and on the seventh day he rested, and was refreshed."⁵⁰ In a previous verse God, made the distinction again, "You yourself are to speak to the Israelites: 'You shall keep my sabbaths, for this was a sign between me and you throughout your generations, given in order that you may know that I, the Lord, sanctify you.'"⁵¹

⁴⁹ Exodus 16:25, Leviticus 25:4

⁵⁰ Exodus 31:16-17 NRSV

So it's only fitting that God required them to return to the Sabbath to reaffirm their commitment to the divine covenant. In our pericope three references of *shabbath* were each utilized to signal the new covenant. Again in the very last chapter of Isaiah this value was reaffirmed, "For as the new heavens and the new earth, which I will make, shall remain before me, says the Lord, so shall your descendants and your name remain. From new moon to new moon, and from sabbath to sabbath, all flesh shall come to worship before me, says the Lord."⁵²

Covenant

בְּרִית (*bēriyth*) was probably the most significant word in the pericope. For every single promise and command was intentionally included in the *bēriyth*. "In OT times this complex concept was the foundation of social order and social relations, and it was particularly the foundation for an understanding of humanity's relationship with God."⁵³

The word was derived from roots that implied cutting and eat. This was because it was customary to "pass through the divided parts of victims."⁵⁴ The word also implied dining together as a custom during a covenant ceremony.⁵⁵ "The original meaning...is not 'agreement or settlement between two parties,' as is commonly argued. *Bēriyth*

⁵¹ Exodus 31:13 NRSV

⁵² Isaiah 66:22-23 NRSV

⁵³ Lawrence O. Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words* (Grand Rapids, MI: Regency Reference Library, 1985), 193-194.

⁵⁴ *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon*, in the Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 6, 2014. <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=H1285&t=KJV>

⁵⁵ G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1977), s.v. "Berith."

implies first and foremost the notion of ‘imposition,’ ‘liability,’ or ‘obligation,’... Thus we find that the *bĕriyth* is commanded... which certainly cannot be said about a mutual agreement.”⁵⁶

Bĕriyth occurs 284 times in the OT, and though there were several types of covenants mentioned, each of them helped to shape our understanding of the way that God related to believers and even nonbelievers. The Abrahamic was God’s promise to produce a blessed family/race descending from the Genesis patriarch.⁵⁷ The Mosaic often referred to the law given to the children of Israel at Sinai, fully equipped with a reminder of God’s redeeming work, blessings, curses all to establish the basis for how this new nation remained in favor with God.⁵⁸ The Davidic was God’s promise that there would always be a descendant of King David to rule as the rightful king of the chosen people. Finally, the New title given specifically to Jeremiah served as a symbol of God’s promise to redefine divine grace by Him taking the initiative to “...put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people.

Richards added a compelling perspective that, “In each of these covenants, God stated what he would do. In three of the four, the purposes will be accomplished at history’s end.”⁵⁹ According to Paul, the Abrahamic decree extended to the gentiles because they believed they were descendants of Abraham.”⁶⁰ The Davidic covenant was

⁵⁶ Ibid., 255.

⁵⁷ Genesis 12:1-3, 15:5, 17:1-8

⁵⁸ Paul J. Achtemeier, ed., *Harper's Bible Dictionary* (San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row, 1985), s.v. “Covenant.”

⁵⁹ Richards, *Expository Dictionary of Bible Words*, 194.

obviously pointing to the Messiah and was fulfilled at the parousia. It was made obvious by God's constant effort to reaffirm and reestablish covenant relationship with Israel that it was Israel that constantly rejected the divine overtures. It was this fact that made the pericope in focus so relevant.

Mountain

The Hebrew *har* (har) was a generic term for mountain, but the word carried a much deeper meaning and significance in Hebrew culture. The term appeared 550 times in the OT and was employed to illustrate a range of concepts including geography and topography, territorial boundaries, strategic positioning in political conflicts as well as religious notions.⁶¹ *TDOT* also added:

Before the introduction of horseshoes...mountains were for all practical purposes inaccessible to horses and were thus relatively secure against invading armies. Hilltops served as lookout posts from which the approach of friend or foe could be announced...On the other hand, the thickly forested hill country often became a battlefield for footsoldiers. Armies could camp with relative security in the mountains to prepare for battle, which would be fought in the valleys.⁶²

Spiritual symbolism suggested mountains decreased the distance between earth and heaven; holy places were located atop mountains for this reason. Mountains were often central in major events in Israel's history; especially her formative history (Gen. 22:2; Ex.19:23; 34:2; 1 Ki. 18:19). In time, Zion became known as God's mountain and thus synonymous with the God's holy sanctuary (Ps. 2:6, 43:3, 78:54). Jon Paulien

⁶⁰ Galatians 3:7 NRSV see vv. 6-9

⁶¹ G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, eds., *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1978), s.v. "Har."

⁶² *Ibid.*, 433.

pointed to the mountain in apocalyptic literature as a symbol of God's kingdom. While destroyed mountains represented fallen, pagan/evil kingdoms that oppose God, the mountain represented God's promise of safety, security, and communion.⁶³⁶⁴

This pericope helped to mark a watershed moment in salvation history. Israel failed in every effort to honor God and remain faithful to the covenant that established for their good. Yahweh now, through the prophet Isaiah, promised to reclaim Israel and to extend covenant relationship and priestly position to all including eunuchs and aliens—outcasts in Israel. God was constructing a new kingdom as a new charter that directed this revised faith community. If only these new members embraced the values and commands that God declared, they were guaranteed the same standing as full-fledged citizens of the heavenly kingdom.

The challenge was that Israel was forced to shift their level of willingness to now be receptive to their new kingdom counterparts. However, during the ministry of Christ not much progress took place. The Savior had to field questions like, “Who is my neighbor?” The reality was, 2000 years still haven't yielded the progress expected. There were still numerous groups that were not welcome and in some cases even excluded from becoming part of the family of God and community of faith. Our churches mirror this ancient in their resemblance to country clubs rather than a diverse family of believers pursuing God with all their hearts.

⁶³ Jon Paulien, “Decoding Revelation's Trumpets: Literary Allusions and the Interpretation of Revelation 8:7-12” (PhD diss., Andrews University, 1988), 256.

⁶⁴ Jon Paulien, *The Gospel from Patmos: Everyday Insights for Living from the Last Book of the Bible* (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald Publishing Association, 2007), 168.

Castration was used to render a specific group of people/type of person powerless or subservient to the ruling power. Today we have an extensive and effective construct in the justice system that did the same to youth and young adults. After passing through a suspect education system and subpar housing accommodations fighting poverty to survive, many fall into the lap of a criminal justice system that rendered them socially and economically powerless. Then, once again, the empire succeeded in maintaining power over the weak. People seeking spiritual direction, meaning in the present world, and eternal security should feel free to run to God's mountain and be accepted in this beloved community.

In God's new kingdom all are welcome; every nation, kindred, tongue and people. Rich, poor, tall, short, red, and yellow, black and white they are precious in his sight. The challenge for us is to exalt only the requirements that God does and set the others aside. God doesn't distinguish based on language, liturgical style, or outward appearances, but rather one's commitment to justice, righteousness, prayer, love, worship and sacrifice.

It's also noteworthy that those who are identified as outcasts received what appeared to be special treatment. Eunuchs were given a legacy/progeny that was better than that of the original sons and daughters. Their identity was changed and directly linked to the sovereign God. They were also given a special monument in the temple to commemorate their commitment to God. The strangers were elevated to the level of priesthood and permitted to minister to God signaling their standing as high priests.

What if the church set aside the discriminatory distinctions that kept people separated from God in order to welcome them as Christ did? What if the church began to pursue outcasts and gather them as Christ did? What if the church became committed

with the diverse image of God's kingdom of believers and pursued it wholeheartedly? Then we'd be able to say, "The kingdom of the world has become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah, and he will reign forever and ever."⁶⁵

New Testament: Acts 17:16-34

Yahweh's promises of a new covenant and restored faith community seemed to meet their fulfillment (at least in part) in the book of Acts. We will explore one event in particular that definitely points back to Isaiah.

Scholars referred to Acts as the second volume of Luke or "Luke-Acts;" as if they were one volume with two parts.⁶⁶ This was due to Luke's address to the book's recipient Theophilus saying, "In the first book...I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning..."⁶⁷ Luke further referred directly to his first volume in which the focus was exclusively that of the life and teachings of Christ. It practically mirrored that of his greeting in the initial volume when he said, "I too decided, after investigating everything carefully from the very first, to write an orderly account for you...so that you may know the truth concerning the things about which you have been instructed."⁶⁸

The nature of these addresses, with references to regular contact and instruction, appeared to point to a deep relational bond. It was as though Theophilus was a sort of

⁶⁵ Revelation 11:15b NRSV

⁶⁶ James L. Mays, ed., *Harper's Bible Commentary* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1988), 1077.

⁶⁷ Acts 1:1 NRSV

⁶⁸ Luke 1:3 NRSV

disciple of Luke; just as Luke was a disciple of Paul.⁶⁹ Luke described himself as one who was not an eyewitness but as one who received these accounts as they had been passed down from those who were.⁷⁰ It was Paul who referred to Luke as a “fellow worker” and “beloved physician.”⁷¹ Luke also referred to himself in Acts as a companion of Paul; recounting specific experiences from Paul’s second and third missionary journeys.⁷²

Concerning Luke’s origin, the *SDA Bible Commentary* suggested, “the context of Col. 4:11-14 seems to imply that Luke was not a Jew, but a gentile, for he is listed in, not.”⁷³ This same commentary later referenced the work of Eusebius stating that Luke “was, presumably, a native of Antioch and some have thought that it was there that he wrote.”⁷⁴ It was possible that Luke was of Greek descent and his connection to someone who (according to the name) appeared to be Grecian as well.

Theophilus was probably Luke’s understudy in the faith so Luke wrote to give him encouragement, clarification and further instruction. Luke was very specific when he stated that he wrote in order that Theophilus would “know the truth.”⁷⁵ It was evident that Luke was in a type of mentor, teacher role in that the “instruction” he gave in Luke-Acts

⁶⁹ Mays, *Harper's Bible Commentary*, 1077.

⁷⁰ Luke 1:2

⁷¹ Colossians 4:14, Philemon 24

⁷² Acts 16:10, 20:6, 27:1, 28:1

⁷³ Francis D. Nichol, ed., “Luke,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1956), 5:664.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 664.

⁷⁵ Luke 1:4

was so extensive. Luke provided the most extensive account of the beginnings of the church than does any other writer. He does this (as far as we know) all for one person. Surely, Luke was a caring pastor-teacher and he cared deeply for the development of Theophilus.

Luke-Acts was most likely written near the end of the first century. Most scholars suggested that it was written between 80-95 CE more specifically.⁷⁶ Therefore Luke's world was characterized by all of the trappings of first century Greco-Roman fanfare. Whether Luke wrote from Antioch, Greece, or Rome, they were all living in and navigating throughout the ruling Roman Empire and were thus deeply steeped in Greco-Roman culture.

Speaking of the context of the Greco-Roman world, James Jeffers wrote, "The New Testament world did not just spring into existence overnight. The forces that created it and maintained it had been in motion for centuries."⁷⁷ By the time Cyrus issued the decree to restore Jerusalem in 538 BCE, the city of Rome had already been founded and the formation of the Roman republic was already in motion. A weakening Persian empire met the surging Alexander the Great who took the world by storm in blistering conquests. However, Alexander died (323 BCE) before he even had a chance to "consolidate his conquests and establish a stable government."⁷⁸ Consequently, Alexander split the empire up between his four generals who in turn continued the process of Hellenization by

⁷⁶ D.A. Carson, Douglas J. Moo, and Leon Morris, eds., *An Introduction to the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1992), 191.

⁷⁷ James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament Era* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 293.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 294

meshing Greek culture with the local customs of the cities where there was a strong presence or outpost of the empire.⁷⁹ Yet, the compartmentalized territories and infighting made them vulnerable. The territories of Ptolemy and Seleucus “for example...frequently fought over Palestine.”⁸⁰

Thus as Rome gained power and structure, the day came when she slowly picked Greece’s territory apart. The Romans heavily employed the process of Hellenization in that they conquered nations and immerse them in the Roman way. In time subjects “absorbed the values of Rome.”⁸¹ According to Elwell and Yarborough, Romans were “relatively benevolent...allowing as much local control of the areas it ruled as possible.”⁸²

The republic—a group of aristocratic family leaders, generally dominated the political landscape in Rome over a span of about five hundred years (509-31). The republic gave Rome a solid structure, yet they lent authority to their brutal army to maintain that structure and order. The Roman army was iconic for its matchless power and might. The autonomy of the armed forces in maintaining distant lands and empowering impoverished classes gave rise to powerful generals like Sulla, Marius, and Julius Ceaser.⁸³ “However, the rise of these powerful generals would contribute to the fall

⁷⁹ Ibid., 294

⁸⁰ Ibid., 294.

⁸¹ Ibid., 302.

⁸² Walter A. Elwell and Robert W. Yarborough, *Encountering the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1998), 194.

⁸³ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 299.

of the republic.”⁸⁴ This led to an emperor-guided governing system. The 1st century CE was laden with upheaval, conflicts, and assassinations for the emperor’s chair. Over the course of the century there were twelve emperors serving on average just over eight years apiece. Yet, the empire still “came together as a stable, homogeneous unit under imperial control...”⁸⁵ The SDA Bible Commentary added:

Yet, in spite of checkered leadership, the empire maintained conditions that were favorable to the spread of the gospel. A fairly stable government, a common administrative system, Roman justice, an expanding citizenship, peace preserved by disciplined legions, roads pressing into every corner of the then-known world, a language (Greek) that was almost universally understood—these were factors that favored the program undertaken by the apostles.⁸⁶

It was in the shadow of this the mighty Roman Empire that the Christian church had an incubator to grow. Moreover, the way had been prepared long before during the intertestamental period. Shortly after the Maccabean revolt, Simon Maccabeus reached out to the Romans to protect them from future Seleucid attacks. Rome responded and “recognized the Jewish religion as a legitimate religion within Rome, giving Jews in Roman territory the right to worship freely according to the dictates of their religion.”⁸⁷ The Jews then, had the same responsibility as other Roman occupied areas to keep the political noise down. As long as there were no major socio-political fights breaking out, they were free to pray and play as they wished.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 299.

⁸⁵ Elwell, Yarborough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 195.

⁸⁶ Francis D. Nichol, ed., “Acts,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary* (Washington, DC: Review & Herald, 1956), 6:114.

⁸⁷ Jeffers, *Greco-Roman World*, 307.

The life, death, burial, resurrection and ascension of Christ however, posed a disruption. At least this is what the Jewish leaders argued to Pilate. Yet, when Christ rose from the dead, his instruction to his disciples had definite implications for the entire empire. He declared, "It is not for you to know the times or periods that the Father has set by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."⁸⁸ It was evident that he intended that the church he had established have global (and thus political) impact. The implication for ministry to gentiles, strangers and outcasts were places the disciples would never have attempted to evangelize without the admonition of Christ. Ellen G. White added, "Thus Christ sought to teach the disciples the truth that in God's kingdom, there are no territorial lines, no caste, no aristocracy; that they must go to all nations, bearing to them the message of a Savior's love."⁸⁹

The first century progressed and that once comfortable incubator created by the Roman Empire become terribly disrupted. "At first the new religion profited from its connections with Judaism. The chosen race was dispersed to many of the corners of the empire, and the Romans eventually tolerated its basic beliefs. Christianity...shared in this toleration. But Judaism fell into disfavor."⁹⁰ Expulsion by Claudius (possibly for fueling with Christians), Christians blamed for the great fire (64 CE), Vespasian destroying

⁸⁸ Acts 1:7-8 NRSV

⁸⁹ Ellen G. White, *Acts of the Apostles* (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Publishing Association, 2002), 20.

⁹⁰ Nichol, ed., *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, 6:114.

Jerusalem (70 CE), and Domitian brutally persecuting made life difficult for Jews and Christians alike.⁹¹

The apostles had no idea what was ahead of them. Their primary fear at the death and ascension of Christ was the Jewish leaders. It was the chief priests, scribes and Pharisees that put Christ to death, and the apostles feared they were next in line so they hid themselves in secret quarters behind barricaded doors.⁹² How ironic that they were to represent Christ to the world, yet they were too afraid to even go outdoors. Christ promised a remedy in the coming of the Paraclete and The Holy Spirit empowered them to spread the message of the gospel.

It was that same spiritual power that served as the overarching theme to the entire book. The Codex Sinaiticus gave one word to the title—Acts.⁹³ This has led some to debate whose acts were actually the center of display.⁹⁴⁹⁵⁹⁶ Besides Peter and Paul, the rest of the apostles received only conciliatory mentions. Furthermore, it was Paul who was not even one of the original twelve that seemed to be the focus of more than half of the book. Yet the main character that remains center stage throughout is none other than the Holy Spirit. It was the Holy Spirit that poured out on the believers. It empowered the apostles to continue the ministry of Christ, convicted them of sin, grew the church,

⁹¹ Elwell, *Yarborough, Encountering the New Testament*, 196.

⁹² John 20:19

⁹³ White, *Acts of the Apostles*, v. Note included in the Preface written by the publishers.

⁹⁴ Elwell, *Yarborough, Encountering the New Testament*, 211.

⁹⁵ Timothy L. Johnson, *Acts of the Apostles*, (Michael Glazier, 1992), Sacra Pagina 5:14-18.

⁹⁶ Jane Williams “Acts of the Apostles, part 7: The Acts of the Holy Spirit” guardian.com January 26, 2009. Accessed January 15, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/jan/26/religion-christianity-apostles>,

unified the new community of believers, and more. The term “spirit” occurred sixty-six times in Acts. The title “Holy Spirit” occurred forty times. Yet, it was not the presence of the Spirit, but rather the moving and work of the Spirit that was paramount.

The keynote of this book was the promise of Christ that the Spirit would come to baptize and empower them.⁹⁷ When the Spirit did come it was with direct and immediate impact. The place where they resided was shaken by a “violent wind” and there was the appearance of flames of fire resting on the heads of the believers. The believers began to speak in various foreign languages, Peter preached to the entire crowd, 3,000 people were baptized, and those in turn committed themselves to the new community.⁹⁸ Later, the Holy Spirit continued to “fall” on collected groups and individuals causing believers to be added to the church.⁹⁹ The spirit also empowered them to speak with boldness, preform miracles, and navigate extenuating circumstances.¹⁰⁰ The Holy Spirit also convicted them of sin and doled out judgment.¹⁰¹

According to Luke the work of the Spirit was evident in that people were being convicted, healed and won to the kingdom. Yet Jesus’s command was that the apostles were to begin their work at Jerusalem and then Judea and so on. Ellen White commented, “That city that had been the scene of his amazing sacrifice for the human race...In Jerusalem there were many who secretly believed Jesus of Nazareth to be the Messiah,

⁹⁷ Acts 1:5, 8

⁹⁸ Acts 2: 2-4,14,41

⁹⁹ Acts 4:28-31; 8:15-17; 10:44-45; 19:5-7

¹⁰⁰ Acts 3:6; 4:8-10; 5:15,16,19-20; 7:55; 8:29,39; 11:12; 16:6,7

¹⁰¹ Acts 5:3,9; 6:10; 8:18-23, 13:8-11

and many who had been deceived by the priests and rulers. To these the gospel must be proclaimed.”¹⁰² The heart of God was towards the chosen people and there was no heavenly intent that they might miss out on the grace of heaven. Thus, there were countless overtures on behalf of heaven that they might be won to this renewed community.¹⁰³

It was after the stoning of Stephen that everything changes. Instead of repentance, the Jews responded with increased vitriol and violence; and the persecution of the saints in Jerusalem intensified.¹⁰⁴ Luke added to this interlude and transition details of Philip’s ministry to Samaria and the Ethiopian Eunuch.¹⁰⁵ Saul was introduced as the newest apostle, and specifically the one “I have chosen to bring my name before Gentiles and kings...”¹⁰⁶ The interlude concluded with the chief apostle—Peter receiving special revelations about God’s intent to spread the gospel and the kingdom among the gentiles.¹⁰⁷ After Peter’s experience, the believers in Jerusalem only acknowledged what God did.¹⁰⁸ From then on, the focus in Acts was almost exclusively on the gospel going to the gentiles; except in the cases where the Jews made every effort to hinder the work

¹⁰² White, *Acts of the Apostles*, 31.

¹⁰³ Acts 2:14,15; 4:5-12; 5:27-32; 7:1-2; 9:28; 13:15-43

¹⁰⁴ Acts 8:1

¹⁰⁵ Acts 8:5-25, 26-40

¹⁰⁶ Acts 9:15

¹⁰⁷ Acts 10:9-16, 44-48

¹⁰⁸ Acts 11:17-18

of Paul and his companions.¹⁰⁹ Nevertheless, the work of the Spirit was not thwarted and “the word of God continued to advance and gain adherents.”¹¹⁰

Acts outlined for the reader the divinely empowered infant church defying the odds and growing by leaps and bounds. As a matter of fact, Acts took the reader on a virtual world tour to view the mighty works of God among those whom never heard. “Acts mentions over thirty countries, more than fifty towns or cities, numerous islands, and nearly one hundred persons, about sixty of whom are not mentioned elsewhere in the New Testament.”¹¹¹ It was evident that the divine purpose was indeed being accomplished. Given the power of the Spirit and movement of the church in Acts, it was certain that every nation, kindred, tongue and people had access to the mercy of the Almighty.

Now we shift our focus to a particular verse that further reveals the work and will of God in the expansion of the Gospel. In Acts 17:16-34, Paul was waiting in Athens for the arrival of Silas and Timothy when he determined to make good use of the layover:

While Paul was waiting for them in Athens, he was deeply distressed to see that the city was full of idols. So he argued in the synagogue with the Jews and the devout persons, and also in the marketplace every day with those who happened to be there. Also some Epicurean and Stoic philosophers debated with him. Some said, “What does this babbler want to say?” Others said, “He seems to be a proclaimer of foreign divinities.” (This was because he was telling the good news about Jesus and the resurrection.) So they took him and brought him to the Areopagus and asked him, “May we know what this new teaching is that you are presenting? It sounds rather strange to us, so we would like to know what

¹⁰⁹ Acts 13:50; 14:19; 17:5

¹¹⁰ Acts 12:24 NRSV

¹¹¹ Elwell, Yarborough, *Encountering the New Testament*, 211.

it means.” Now all the Athenians and the foreigners living there would spend their time in nothing but telling or hearing something new.

Then Paul stood in front of the Areopagus and said, “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way. For as I went through the city and looked carefully at the objects of your worship, I found among them an altar with the inscription, ‘To an unknown god.’ What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you. The God who made the world and everything in it, he who is Lord of heaven and earth, does not live in shrines made by human hands, nor is he served by human hands, as though he needed anything, since he himself gives to all mortals life and breath and all things. From one ancestor he made all nations to inhabit the whole earth, and he allotted the times of their existence and the boundaries of the places where they would live, so that they would search for God and perhaps grope for him and find him—though indeed he is not far from each one of us. For ‘In him we live and move and have our being’; as even some of your own poets have said,

‘For we too are his offspring.’

Since we are God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the deity is like gold, or silver, or stone, an image formed by the art and imagination of mortals. While God has overlooked the times of human ignorance, now he commands all people everywhere to repent, because he has fixed a day on which he will have the world judged in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed, and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead.”

When they heard of the resurrection of the dead, some scoffed; but others said, “We will hear you again about this.” At that point Paul left them. But some of them joined him and became believers, including Dionysius the Areopagite and a woman named Damaris, and others with them.”¹¹²

Areopagus

The very first word needing interrogation in this pericope was

Ἄρειος πάγος (*Areios pagos*). It occurred only twice in all of scripture and both instances were in this passage. There was one variant in Ἀρεοπαγίτης (*Areopagitēs*) translated “Areopagite” which also only occurred in this passage. Although it was describing a

¹¹² Acts 17:16-34 NRSV

place/type of person, the word held deep contextual significance speaking to the uniqueness of this passage and Paul's manner of engagement.

As was signaled by the Greek Ἄρειος πάγος, Aeropagus was a compound word made from Ἄρειος –Ares, also known as Mars the Greek god of war, and πάγος which simply means hill. It derived from πήγνυμι (*pēgnyμι*), which means to build up, to come together, and to fasten together. Speaking of the Areopagus, Thayer's Greek Lexicon states:

This hill belonged to (Ares) Mars and was called Mar's Hill; so called, because, as the story went, Mars, having slain Halirrhothius, son of Neptune, for the attempted violation of his daughter Alicippe, was tried for the murder here before twelve gods as judges. This place was the location where the judges convened who, by appointment of Solon, had jurisdiction of capital offences, (as wilful murder, arson, poisoning, malicious wounding, and breach of established religious usages). The court itself was called Areopagus from the place where it sat, also "Areum judicium" an "curia". To that hill the apostle Paul was not led to defend himself before judges, but that he might set forth his opinions on divine subjects to a greater multitude of people, flocking together there and eager to hear something new.¹¹³

Given the nature and function of the Areopagus it can be assumed that Dionysius the Aeropagite was not a resident of the hill because it was not a livable community, but a council of judges. Dionysius was a member of the council and a man of great social standing and reputation in the Athens social and political scene.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Thayer's Greek Lexicon, in the Blue Letter Bible, accessed January 16, 2014, <http://www.blueletterbible.org/lang/lexicon/lexicon.cfm?Strong=G697&t=RSV>

¹¹⁴ Ben Witherington III, *The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 532-33.

May

The Athenians brought Paul to the Areopagus and asked him to say more about his ideas. They asked, “May we know what this new teaching is which you present?”¹¹⁵ The Greek word translated “may” was δυνάμεθα. This verb came from the word δύναμαι, which means “to be able, have power, whether by personal ability, permission, or opportunity.”¹¹⁶ δύναμαι was used 210 times in the NT. More specifically δυνάμεθα was used eighteen times. In the *TDNT*, Walter Grundmann added, “Words deriving from the stem δυνα- all have the basic meaning of ‘being able,’ of ‘capacity’ in virtue of an ability...It is mostly used in a very weak sense. It is common from the time of Homer and examples can be found everywhere.”¹¹⁷

The phrase “λέγοντες δυνάμεθα γινῶναι” suggested that they were asking a favor of Paul for their benefit. Specifically, they intended to benefit from this new information. They believed they were “empowered” by listening to him.

Hear

The text says that the Athenians and all the people who lived there “spent their time in nothing except telling or hearing something new.” To an abrupt (and possibly disrupted) end of Paul’s speech, the leaders replied, “We will hear you again about this”

¹¹⁵ Acts 17:19b NRSV

¹¹⁶ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Tarrytown, NY: Fleming H. Revell, 1981), 48.

¹¹⁷ Werner Foerster, “δύναμαι,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 2, *A-H* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 284.

(ἀκουσόμεθά σου περὶ τούτου καὶ πάλιν).¹¹⁸ They requested to “hear” what this new teacher with strange ideas had to say, and they promised to listen to more at another time. Both ἀκούειν and ἀκουσόμεθά were derivatives of ἀκούω, which simply means; “to hear.” ἀκούω and all of its forms appeared 437 times in the NT. 427 of those occurrences simply referred to the act of hearing, listening and giving audience.

In the *TDNT*, Gerhard Kittel suggested that, “The use of ἀκούω...in the NT reflected something of significance of the Word as it is spoken and as it is to be heard in the reciprocal NT relationship between God and man. The hearing of man represents correlation to the revelation of the Word, and in biblical religion it is thus the essential form in which this divine revelation is appropriated.”¹¹⁹ Kittel added the idea that various schools of thought and literary sources emphasized the value of seeing over hearing to avoid deception.¹²⁰ On the other hand, biblical faith is based on hearing: “Hear O Israel,” “Today if you hear his voice,” “Let he who has an ear to hear,” “Blessed are they who do not see and yet believe,” “Consequently faith comes by hearing...”¹²¹ Paul acknowledged an uncommon virtue of the Athenians and the culture of the Areopagus in their willingness to listen and their diligence to “reason together” and “see if these things are so.”¹²²

¹¹⁸ Acts 17:32b NRSV

¹¹⁹ Gerhard Kittel, “ἀκούω, ἀκοή, εἰς-, ἐπ-, παρακούω, παρακοή, υπακούω, υπακοή, υπηκοός,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1, A-F (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 216.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 217.

¹²¹ Deut. 6:4; Matt. 11:15; Jn. 20:29; Rom. 10:17

¹²² Is. 1:18; Acts 17:11

Extremely Religious

Paul was possibly honored (or at least grateful) to address such a prestigious and historical platform. He began his speech with a simple observation. “Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way.” On the surface, the statement appeared to be a sort of compliment, yet that phrase “extremely religious” was translated in various ways: “very religious,” “too superstitious,” “given up to demon worship,” etc. It was therefore essential that a proper understanding of the meaning of the term be ascertained. In the TDNT, Werner Foerster clarified this compound word referring to it as a, “general expression of ‘piety,’ the more precise sense varying according to the two constituents δειδω = “to fear” (εδαισα) and δαίμων. Thus on one side δεισιδαιμονία may on the one side denote ‘pious attitude toward the gods’ i.e. ‘religion,’ and on the other ‘excessive fear of them.’”¹²³

Occurring here in its participle form, δεισιδαιμονεστέρους was only used once in the NT. It is a derivative of δεισιδαιμονία which only occurs in one other verse in the NT. Although this word was almost nonexistent in NT literature, according to Ceslas Spicq, there was common usage in classical literature.¹²⁴ As mentioned in the TDNT, classical usage varied between positive and pejorative use. In the positive sense the phrase suggested that one was religious or respectful to the gods. In the pejorative sense the

¹²³ Werner Foerster, “δεισιδαιμων, δεισιδαιμονία,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 2, A-H (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1964), 20.

¹²⁴ Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament*, 3rd ed., trans. James D. Ernest (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1994), 1:305-6.

word referred to someone punctilious or obsessive in religious matters.¹²⁵ With the having two uses Spicq added, “it is easy to see a favorable sense in *desidaimon* in Acts 17:22, the praise with which Paul begins his discourse on the Aeropagus...No judgment for ill or for good is made of this piety.”¹²⁶

Worship

Paul acknowledged that they were very devout in their attempts to honor the gods. He had been disturbed when he entered the city and saw there were so many idols. He was appreciative that they (out of their devotion) erected an altar to an unknown god; if not appreciative of the idol itself, surely appreciative of the gesture as a sign of devotion. He said, “What therefore you worship as unknown, this I proclaim to you.”¹²⁷ The term used here for worship signifying “objects of worship” was a derivative of the root word *σέβω*, meaning “to worship.” Yet, in the second part the term was specifically, *εὐσεβεῖτε*, from the verb *εὐσεβέω*, “to act piously or reverently.” This term was only used on one other occasion in the NT in reference to duty and respect due to one’s elders.¹²⁸

In the *TDNT*, Foerster added, “Except in the Past. and 2 Pt. *εὐσεβ-* was never used in the NT for Christian faith and life...In the Aeropagus address...the verb fitting in well with the imprecise way in which the religion of the Athenians is spoken of at the

¹²⁵ Ibid., 305-6.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 308.

¹²⁷ Acts 17:23b NRSV

¹²⁸ 1Ti. 5:4

outset.”¹²⁹ It was therefore assumed that the word in this context was intended to refer to reverence and devotion toward the gods in a generic sense.

The text presented the most dynamic form of evangelistic engagement in the entire NT. Here we see Paul conversing and debating with secular Greeks to the point that they determined what he presented be reviewed by the grand council of judges at the Aeropagus and the entire public. While some scholars argued that Paul sought to belittle or demean the Athenian religion by suggesting they were “too superstitious,” the text inferred that Paul sought to establish rapport with this austere group of listeners.¹³⁰ It would have been gravely misguided to insult them at the outset of his speech.

Seeking to connect their minds and hearts to the eternal God of heaven, Paul used imagery and ideas that they were familiar with. Although he was disturbed by the rampant idolatry he set his discomfort aside to engage his audience. He complimented their devotion and employed a ready and relevant image as an immediate object lesson. Claiming to have knowledge of the unknown served as a rhetorical device that captured the attention of the Athenians. As he continued, he employs various devices of form and content to increase the likelihood of their reception to the Gospel message.¹³¹ Paul was careful not to change or water down his message, yet he was also careful to establish a rhetorical relationship with his audience using familiar oratorical devices.

¹²⁹ Werner Foerster, “εὐσεβής, εὐσεβεία, εὐσεβέω,” in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, vol. 7, Σ (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1971), 189-90.

¹³⁰ Francis D. Nichol, ed., “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *Seventh-day Adventist Bible Commentary*, vol. 6, *Acts to Ephesians* (Washington, DC: Review & Herad, 1957), 350. See also Charles F. Pfeiffer and Everett F. Harrison, eds., *Wycliffe Bible Commentary*, 19th ed. (1962; repr., Chicago, IL: Moody, 1981), 1157. Also in Robert W. Wall, “The Acts of the Apostles,” in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, ed. Leander E. Keck (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2002), 10:245.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 245-7.

Some have argued that Paul failed miserably on this major stage, yet the text reported that Paul's sermon won over one of the councilmembers, Dionysius, another notable woman, "and others." We do not know exactly how fruitful Paul's methods were in retaining the Athenians in the Christian movement, yet we can acknowledge his creative means of connecting and communicating the gospel was unparalleled in scripture.

Paul sets aside his previous disgust, engaged those pagan idol worshippers, observed their cultural ways, and spoke to them in a language that they understood. As a result, people joined the kingdom of God. It was ironic, that this grand evangelistic effort took place on a mountain. Herein lay a model for welcoming outcasts, strangers, and unbelievers to God's holy mountain that they might connect with the Almighty and be joined to the everlasting kingdom.

CHAPTER THREE

HISTORICAL FOUNDATIONS

August 11, 2013 marked the fortieth birthday of Hip-Hop culture. The history was not long, yet it possessed a very complex and compelling story of creativity and community development. As the official story goes, it all started with a little party.¹ DJ Kool Herc and his sister Cindy threw a party to celebrate the close of the summer and the approaching school year. Writing for the BBC, Rebecca Laurence recounted how, “The party wasn’t special for its size – the rec room could only hold a few hundred people. Its venue and location weren’t particularly auspicious. Yet it marked a turning point—a spark which would ignite an international movement that is still with us today.”²

Many don’t initially recognize the political power behind the sights and sounds of Hip Hop, yet, from its inception, Hip-Hop had deep political underpinnings. Jeff Chang is an authority in the area of Hip-Hop history, he said, “Hip hop did not start as a political movement... There was no manifesto. The kids who started it were simply trying to find

¹ Ron Lawrence and Hassan Pore, “Founding Fathers: The Untold Story of Hip-Hop” (video), 2009, accessed December 11, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x2xR-mc-Ikw>. This documentary challenges the origins of Hip-Hop and asserts that this new style and form of expression was a fusion of the work of several DJs experimenting with music long before Kool Herc ever threw that party in August of 73’. Herc’s story is utilized here because it is widely accepted view and shows the organic roots of the culture. At the very least, the documentary is evidence that Hip-Hop is part of the long continuum of authentic expression of people of color in America and the vibrancy of impoverished New York’s underground arts scene in the sixties and seventies. It reminds us that what happened with Hip-Hop wasn’t some freak accident, but the result of experimentation in an environment fertile with creative genius.

² Rebecca Laurence, “40 Years On from the Party Where Hip Hop Was Born,” *BBC*, August 9, 2013, accessed January 19, 2014, <http://www.bbc.com/culture/story/20130809-the-party-where-hip-hop-was-born>.

ways to pass the time, they were trying to have fun. But they grew up under the politics of abandonment and because of this, their pastimes contained the seeds for a kind of mass cultural renewal.”³ Jeff Chang’s seminal work *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop* did a masterful job of describing the historical context in which Hip-Hop was birthed.

The Bronx reaped the worst of the whirlwind of change in the midst of Robert Moses’s master plan for the redevelopment and expansion of Manhattan and the construction of the Cross-Bronx Expressway. Chang wrote:

In his (*Moses*) grand ambitions, high modernism met maximum density. Vast housing complexes were designed on the idyllic ‘tower-in-a-park’ model... So in the New York area’s construction explosion of the 1950s and 60s, middle-class whites got sprawling, pre-fab, white picket-fence, whites-only, Levittown suburbs, while working class strugglers and strivers got nine or more monotonous slabs of housing rising out of isolating, desolate, soon-to-be crime-ridden ‘parks.’⁴

It was these events that incubated an environment laden with joblessness and poverty, dilapidated, derelict neighborhoods and apartment buildings, displaced families and interrupted family systems. This gave rise to a social unrest that augmented the wider angst and anger of black people in the US at that time. While mainstream black America was moving up via the civil rights movement, the Bronx was on a steady downward spiral. The poor residents were blamed for the circumstances and “benign neglect” began with the removal and retreat of several vital services that helped to maintain the city.⁵

I remember hearing a pastor say, “Gangs have always been a response to an economic problem.” Ironically, that pastor was a former gang member from New York.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 12. Italics applied.

⁵ Ibid., 14.

Gangs flooded the Bronx borough of New York. In *Somebody Scream*, Marcus Reeves recorded:

“Blacks and Latinos formed makeshift street families to protect themselves...The Black Spades one of New York’s largest street gangs was predominately black. The Savage Nomads, another of the city’s largest gangs, were primarily Hispanic...in between these two groups sat a massive roster of other street organizations...helping to care the Bronx into territories and turfs.⁶

These gangs were considered by many to be a positive force in the Bronx, forcing many drug dealers and users out of their neighborhood with violence.⁷ Their anger and frustration was still displaced. The culprits who created this depraved environment were far removed from the wreckage. Fighting with the pushers, users, and other gangs, communities rarely realized they were fighting themselves. They soon find new ways to express their frustrations.

One such form of expression was graffiti. Graffiti quickly became a creative form of counter-terrorism. As displaced, impoverished youth were left to languish in depraved environments, they took their aerosol cans to the walls of abandoned buildings and made creative designs among the ruins of capitalist destruction. These neo-urban artistic rogues raided the train yards and subway tunnels “tagging” their monikers and murals on as many blank pieces of concrete, wood and metal as possible. Initially, in the mid and late sixties, kids simply “tagged” their alias to a train car or a billboard to gain recognition.⁸ As tagging became more widespread, the art form became increasingly more complex

⁶ Marcus Reeves, *Somebody Scream: Rap Music's Rise to Prominence in the Aftermath of Black Power* (New York: Faber and Faber, 2008), 16.

⁷ Ibid., 16.

⁸ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 74.

and creative. Reeves commented, “These youths could capture fame through this illegal art, constructing identities that were larger than the overcrowded and crumbling environment around them.”⁹ Tricia Rose quoted graffiti artist and Hip-Hop pioneer Fab Five Freddy saying, ““you make a new style. That’s what life on the street is all about. What’s at stake is honor and position on the street. That’s what makes it so important, that’s what makes it feel so good—that pressure on you to be the best. Or to try to be the best. To develop a new style nobody can deal with.””¹⁰

Graffiti was the first of the four elements to emerge in a way that commanded widespread public attention. The four elements that formed the foundation of Hip-Hop was completed with DJing, Breaking, and Emceeing. DJing rose to prominence in Hip Hop culture next. This was where DJ Kool Herc’s party became so significant. It was Herc that hosted and DJed for what was considered the first Hip-Hop party. Herc was also known for pioneering other aspects of DJing like his infamous “Herculords.” In her book *Black Noise*, Tricia Rose commented, “DJ Kool Herc was known for his massive stereo speakers (which he named Herculords) and his practice of extending obscure instrumental breaks that created an endless collage of peak dance beats named b-beats or break-beats.”¹¹

DJs employed artistic and mechanical engineering genius in mastering this unconventional use of old tools and sounds. DJs would sample all types of music from Soul, to Rock, Jazz, even Country and other genres. DJs would then layer different cuts

⁹ Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, 16.

¹⁰ Tricia Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Hanover, NH: University Press, 1994), 38.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 51.

and breaks to create new sounds. Rose's *Black Noise* further asserted, "DJs [as] the central figures in hip hop; they supplied the break-beat for breakdancers and the soundtrack for graffiti crew socializing. Early DJs would connect their turntables and speakers to any available electrical source, including street lights, turning public parks and streets into impromptu parties and community centers."¹² DJ Kool Herc was one of the most influential DJs in Hip-Hop's earliest years. Nevertheless, there were others like Grandmaster Flash, Afrika Bambaataa, and Jazzy Jay, who were supported by their neighborhoods, crews, and gangs.

The significance of this new form of music was manifested in several different ways. It's looping break-beats, rumbling bass lines and repetitive rhythms confronted and challenged conventional forms of melody, harmony and sound serving as a sort of combative reaction to the unyielding continuity of melody and disco.¹³ These break-beats were symbolic of the broken homes, disjointed lives, and interrupted cycles caused by poverty and displacement. In 1980, rap artist Kurtis Blow would record a song entitled "The Breaks." The song referred to the bad-breaks of life, while simultaneously referring to the breaks in the music that provide inspiration. He rhymed, "Breaks to win and breaks to lose. These here breaks will rock your shoes."¹⁴ These young urbanites exemplified inventive musicianship while formal musical training programming was being cut from their school districts.¹⁵

¹² Ibid., 51.

¹³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴ Kurtis Blow, rapper, *The Breaks*, by James B. Moore, Mercury, 1980.

¹⁵ Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

Breakdancing came as a physical expression of this disjointed, provocative and fun new music. Breakers would mimic the sounds of the breaks as they stomped out the beat.¹⁶ Flips, head-spins, hand-spins, handstands, popping, locking, and a myriad of other acrobatic moves marked this new style of dance that was just as cutting edge as the break-beats they danced to.

Breakdancing crews formed a seamless extension to the gangs that ran the various territories throughout the Bronx. The Breakdancing battles were not simply dance-offs as much as they were a new form of gang war. These breakdance battles were not without violent happenings.¹⁷ This was a new way to channel negative energy brewing from bad blood and various territorial issues.

The last element to develop would become the most popular of them all: emceeing. The best DJs know how to keep the party live. The DJ was the true host of the party. DJs employed several means along with music to ensure the crowd enjoyed themselves. They engaged the crowd by talking between tracks getting the crowd hyped. This was the perfect moment for rap to evolve and take center-stage in the Hip-Hop arena. DJs gave shout-outs, crafted and recited simple rhymes to entertain the crowd and keep themselves involved.

By 1975, Kool Herc had assembled a crew of his own called the Herculoids, equipped with dancers, DJs, and emcees to keep the party bumping.¹⁸ Herc and emcees in his crew like Coke La Rock and Dickey spat rhymes like:

¹⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁷ Ibid., 48.

You never heard it like this before,
 And you're back for more and more and more
 Of this here rock-ness
 'Cause you see, we rock with the rockers
 We jam with the jammers,
 We party with the partyers
 Young lady don't hurt nobody.
 It ain't no fun till we all get some.
 Don't hurt nobody young lady!
 There's no story that can't be told

There's no horse that can't be rode
 No bull can't be stopped
 And no disco we can't rock
 Herc! Herc!
 Who's the man with the master plan
 From the land of Gracie Grace?
 Herc! Herc!¹⁹

It was evident that Kool Herc was king in those early years, but by 1977 his influence was waning. Other DJs were improving their equipment and skills to match and master Herc's. Afrika Bambaataa and Grandmaster Flash continued gaining notoriety and Flash begun working with a promising emcee—Melle Mel. By 1979 the records of rappers and crews like Kurtis Blow, The Sugar Hill Gang, Grandmaster Flash, and the Furious Five had commercial success. Although many of the early rhymes were very simplistic, these urban poets developed styles and methods of rap that arrested the attention of the entire world.

The Sugar Hill Gang's "Rapper's Delight" was the first major hit in 1979. It was such a commercial success that, "they must've moved two million records in a month on

¹⁸ Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 81.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 82.

twelve-inch vinyl just in New York.”²⁰ Then came Kurtis Blow’s “The Breaks” in 1980. It should be noted that Kurtis Blow also released “Christmas Rappin” in 1979, but it wasn’t nearly as successful as “Rapper’s Delight.” Nevertheless, to many New Yorkers the Sugar Hill Gang’s track was a sham in that it featured no-name rappers and stolen lyrics. It was Melle Mel’s rhymes on “The Message” by Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five that garnered commercial success, critical acclaim, and street credibility. In fact, they recorded and released their first single (“Superappin”) right after The Sugar Hill Gang released “Rapper’s Delight, but It wasn’t nearly as impactful as their 1982 hit “The Message.” This track became universally considered as the most influential rap song in the history of Hip-Hop. Melle Mel rhymed about crime and the deprivation of the inner city—something that all too many American youth related to in 1982. The broken promises of FDR’s “New Deal” compounded against the destructive wake of American capitalism and the seemingly discontinued efforts of the civil rights movement, made Melle Mel sound like the spirit of Malcom X and Martin King rested on his tongue. He spoke such powerful truths as;

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
 How I keep from going under
 It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
 How I keep from going under

Broken glass everywhere
 People pissin' on the stairs, you know they just don't care
 I can't take the smell, I can't take the noise
 Got no money to move out, I guess I got no choice
 Rats in the front room, roaches in the back
 Junkies in the alley with the baseball bat

²⁰ Ibid., 131.

I tried to get away, but I couldn't get far
Cause a man with a tow-truck repossessed my car

Don't push me cause I'm close to the edge
I'm trying not to lose my head, ah huh-huh-huh

It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under
It's like a jungle sometimes it makes me wonder
How I keep from going under²¹

It was the song heard round the world; and its lyrics still reverberate to this day. It was by this time that rap had clearly become the center of Hip-Hop. Rap groups were popping up everywhere to get in on the ground floor of the new recording craze.²² Everybody saw the success of the Sugar Hill Gang record and wanted to have a piece of the pie. The floodgates were wide open and Hip-Hop came crashing through.

The rest of the eighties were characterized by the internationally heralded Run-DMC whose legacy was in their street persona yet crossover appeal. Then there was the youthful sensation of LL Cool J, who brought a gritty lover-boy's flavor to rap. As the eighties drew on the hard-hitting social commentary of Public Enemy arrested the attention of the masses, while the lyrical genius of Rakim, from the group Eric B and Rakim, pointed to the power of the poetic voice in Hip-Hop.

Several female rappers established themselves firmly in the rap pantheon. Rappers like MC Lyte, Queen Latifah, and Salt & Pepa exemplified the street image and lyrical ability without sacrificing their finer feminine qualities. All of these rappers and

²¹ Melle Mel, rapper/Grandmaster Flash and the Furious Five, *The Message*, by Ed Fletcher, Sugar Hill Records, 1982.

²² Chang, *Can't Stop Won't Stop*, 132.

others (like KRS-One, A Tribe Called Quest, Too Short and NWA) represented in part what was known as the golden age of Hip-Hop.²³

Other rappers surfaced around the early to mid nineties helping to catapult rap into an entirely different stratosphere of sales and marketability. The early 90s saw the rise of heralded rappers like Nas, Wu-tang Clan (and notable member Method Man), Snoop Dogg, Outkast and of course the Notorious B.I.G. and 2pac. These rappers, namely 2pac and B.I.G, garnered not simply critical acclaim, but mythical status after being gunned down in a span of about six months between 1996 and 1997. The deaths of these two kingpins left a void that invited the likes of Eminem, Jay-Z and Master-P into the emcee fold. These rappers went on to become some of the most recognizable names in Hip-Hop. Master P, on the other hand was known as one of the pioneers of southern rap. Although rappers like UGK, Eightball and MJG, Outkast, Scarface, and the Geto Boys made records since the late eighties and early nineties Master P's sharp business sense garnered numerous platinum albums for his record label No Limit Records. Master P and No Limit opened the door for other southern rappers like Cash Money, Three 6 Mafia, Trick Daddy and others.

The 2000s are best known as the market years. In the years following the turn of the century, rappers seemed to become consumed with the dollars and cents of rap. Rappers became increasingly more enterprising and innovative in terms of mainstream business and market ventures. Rappers like Busta Rhymes made a song as a de-facto advertisement for liquor brand Courvoisier, while Nelly made a song about Nike's Air

²³ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections On Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2010), 64.

Force One sneakers.²⁴ 50 Cent started pushing Vitamin Water, and Puff Daddy took to calling himself and those signed to an endorsement deal with vodka maker Ciroc the “Ciroc Boys.”²⁵ With the cell phone on the rise rappers turned to selling ringtone versions of their songs and soon digital downloads of exclusive music released.

Hip-Hop expanded the reach of influence with successful forays into film with movies like: *Wild Style* (1983), *Breakin* (1984), *Beat Street* (1984), *Krush Groove* (1985), *House Party* (1990), *Boyz N the Hood* (1991), *South Central* (1992), *Juice* (1992), *Menace II Society* (1993), *CB4* (1993), *Above the Rim* (1994), *I Got the Hook-up* (1998), *8 Mile* (2002), *Hustle & Flow* (2005), *Get Rich or Die Tryin* (2005), *Notorious* (2008). These movies featured and depicted numerous aspects of Hip-Hop culture and featured virtually completely Hip-Hop soundtracks. They gave the world a panoramic view of the world of Hip-Hop. Most of them had rappers starring in major roles.

Hip-Hop artists and purveyors also ventured into the world of fashion design. The documentary film *Just for Kicks* featured a clip of Run-DMC telling the story of how in 1986, they practically demanded one million dollars from athletic apparel giant Adidas for promoting their shoes; and received it.²⁶ The irony was that at the time the particular model they were promoting was nearly discontinued and Adidas as well as other sneaker

²⁴ Gil Kaufman, “Push the Courvoisier: Are Rappers Paid for Product Placement?,” *mtv.com*, June 09, 2003, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.mtv.com/news/articles/1472393/rappers-paid-product-placement.jhtml>.

²⁵ “Diddy Inks Deal to Develop Vodka Brand,” *billboard.com*, January 27, 2014, accessed January 27, 2014, <http://www.billboard.com/articles/news/1047716/diddy-inks-deal-to-develop-vodka-brand>.

²⁶ Come Chantrel and Thibaut de Longeville, “Just for Kicks” (video), 2005, 11:30, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gAFIvKLva58>.

brands were trying to figure out how to reposition themselves in the market.²⁷ This was the beginning of what would be a very lucrative relationship between the Hip-Hop community and the fashion world. Numerous rap industry pros have created their own clothing brands like: Russell Simmons (Phat Farm), Jay-Z (Rocawear), Wu-tang Clan (Wu-Wear), Nelly (Apple Bottoms). Rappers have followed in the footsteps of Run-DMC and managed to garner sneaker endorsement deals. Jay-Z, Rick Ross, and 50 Cent all held contracts with Reebok. Comparatively, Wiz Kalifah contracted with Converse, while Pharrell Williams signed with Japanese shoe brand Bathing Ape, and Missy Elliot with Adidas.²⁸

Hip-Hop evolved from a small rec center party to a multibillion-dollar industry in the global marketplace.²⁹ Several rappers became so wealthy that even Forbes started tracking their wealth.³⁰ Rappers like Will Smith, LL Cool J, Queen Latifah and Markey Mark Wahlberg went on to star in other areas of entertainment.³¹ Despite the vast attack to the record sales market due to widespread file sharing, Hip-Hop continued to enjoy sales in the tens of millions.³²

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Dan Charnas, *The Big Payback: the History of the Business of Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: New American Library, 2011), ix.

³⁰ Zack O'Malley Greenburg, "The Forbes Five: Hip-Hop's Wealthiest Artists 2013," *forbes.com*, March 27, 2013, accessed January 26, 2014, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/zackomalleygreenburg/2013/03/27/the-forbes-five-hip-hops-wealthiest-artists-2013/>.

³¹ Kevin Powers, "10 Best and Worst Rappers Turned Movie Actors Today," *firstshowing.net*, May 13, 2008, accessed January 26, 2014, <http://www.firstshowing.net/2008/10-best-and-worst-rappers-turned-movie-actors-today/>.

What made the rise of Hip-Hop so significant was the context in which it arose. The local context of the Bronx provided a powerful launching pad for the movement. Nevertheless, it was the state of African-American communities across the nation in the 70s and 80s that added a colorful backstory to the progress of Hip-Hop culture. Several factors aligned with African-American civil rights, and upward socioeconomic mobility, catapulted Hip-Hop and its impoverished into the spotlight of international stardom and success.

Tricia Rose suggested, “The postindustrial city, which provided the context for creative development among hip hop’s earliest innovators, shaped their cultural terrain, access to space, materials, and education.”³³ In other words, these creative young people were literally rebuilding their environment and recreating systems and values for security, economic development, and social interaction. Rose added that often b-boys practiced their dances outside because safe indoor spaces were few and far between. One such large space existed in the Police Athletic League building, yet it was avoided because one was harassed and watched when present.³⁴

Jeff Chang argued, “The tension between commerce and culture became one of the main storylines of the Hip-Hop generation. The other was the relationship between youth and authority. If rap presented an opportunity for hip-hop to be commodified,

³² “Music Album Sales in the United States in 2012, by Genre* (In Millions),” Statista.com, January 26, 2014, accessed January 26, 2014, <http://www.statista.com/statistics/188910/us-music-album-sales-by-genre-2010/>.

³³ Rose, *Black Noise*, 34.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48.

graffiti presented an opportunity for it to be demonized.”³⁵ There was a deep American hypocrisy that Hip-Hop revealed in its exposition of the oppressive capitalistic machines that benefited from the art. While politicians benefited from a public fear and disdain for the images that Hip-Hop produced, both Wall Street and Capitol Hill were complicit in the creation of the deprived context from which Hip-Hop arose.

As with the b-boys at the Police Athletic League, New York youth were constantly under suspicion that they were vandal graffiti artists. Part of the efforts of the 1976 “War on Graffiti” encouraged law enforcement to produce the profile of a supposed common offender of graffiti, which was basically a description of every Black or Latino teen male in the winter carrying a bag of some sort.³⁶

The backdrop to all of this was a socioeconomic issue. Bakari Kitwana wrote, “Although by 1999, according to the US Census Bureau, the number of blacks living below the poverty line had dropped to its lowest level, many young blacks remain poor and working poor. The Urban Institute estimates that 60 percent of the America’s poor youth are black.”³⁷ To this point Marcus Reeves added that in 1980 there were 26,495,070 black people living in the US; with 85 percent of them living in urban areas.³⁸ Reeves continued:

For black popular culture and indeed the masses of Black America, the late 1970s were about escapism. Following the social justice movements of the 1960s and ‘70s, black America—as well as the rest of the country—

³⁵ Chang, *Can’t Stop Won’t Stop*, 134.

³⁶ Ibid., 135.

³⁷ Kitwana, *The Hip Hop Generation*, 20.

³⁸ Reeves, *Somebody Scream*, 23.

was battle weary, jaded by unfulfilled promises, but ready to snatch its piece of the dream. The struggle opened doors for blacks to better employment opportunities, expanding the black middle class (those who would move on up...and out of the black ghettos).³⁹

This meant that the majority of African-Americans who didn't make the transition to middle class were left to languish in the downtrodden inner-city slums. Subsisting on the drops of social welfare programs, such government assistance was under attack towards the end of the Carter administration and throughout the Reagan administration.⁴⁰

In *Disintegration*, Eugene Robinson cited, as do Bakari, Rose, Chang, and Reeves, that a splintering of black America was caused by various factors during and after the civil rights period. "The combination of industrial transformation, devastation from the riots, and the advents of new options led many African Americans to move out of the inner cities."⁴¹

Robinson suggested that the riots after Dr. King's assassination affected both neighborhoods and commercial centers that benefitted blacks.⁴² This dealt a difficult blow to the financial center of the black inner city. Most particularly upward mobility and stable families marked another mass exodus of blacks to the suburbs for greener pastures. This left poor blacks alone in socio-economically imbalanced, historic neighborhoods to fend for their selves. Add to that the social welfare divestment that took place at the end of the Carter administration and the Reagan administration, and you have a lethal cocktail

³⁹ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 27-8.

⁴¹ Eugene Robinson, *Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America* (New York, NY: Anchor, 2010), 64.

⁴² Ibid., 60.

for societal decline. Cornel West added that with this decline was a decline of spiritual communities that helped people find meaning and hope, while guarding against a “pervasive spiritual impoverishment.”⁴³

It was Christopher Wallace (Notorious B.I.G.) who said, “If I wasn't in the rap game, I'd probably have a ki' knee deep in the crack game. Because the streets is a short stop; either you're slingin' crack rock or you got a wicked jump shot.”⁴⁴ Wallace's lyrics articulated the hopelessness that seized African-American inner cities. With so many African-Americans appearing to do well, it was through Wallace's lyrics that one saw more clearly the splintering that had long begun to take place in black communities.

As a privileged black journalist, Cora Daniels illustrated this tension from the other end of the spectrum. While discussing the history of ghettos and their shift from places of restriction to a psychological state of existence in her book *Ghetto Nation*, Daniels suggested:

Granted, to now use ghetto to define such an undesirable mind-set, given the word's long association with poverty, could be seen as another way for people with middle-class sensibilities to demonize the poor. There is no doubt in my mind that such classism did contribute to ghetto making the leap from place to being. It was disgust for the ghetto that led to using the word to describe behavior that also inspired disgust.⁴⁵

She maintained that she did not discriminate between the classes. Anyone could be ghetto. Yet, when one referred to ghetto, it was code language for poor, black, ignorant

⁴³ Cornel West, *Race Matters* (New York, NY: Vintage, 1994), 5.

⁴⁴ Christopher Wallace, writer/rapper, “Things Done Changed,” by Dominic Owens, Bad Boy Records, 1994.

⁴⁵ Cora Daniels, *Ghetto Nation: Dispatches from America's Culture War* (New York, NY: Broadway, 2007), 6.

and embarrassing. Almost never was the phrase used to describe poor whites. It was a disparaging term and its use in black communities highlight the disintegration and disunity among black people.

In the book *Disintegration*, Eugene Robinson described splintering in black communities by using four distinct classes: the elite (Transcendent), the middle-class (Mainstream), multiracial and immigrant (Emergent), and the urban poor (Abandoned).⁴⁶ Robinson powerfully illustrated the tensions between these groups when he said:

And where these distinct “nations” rub against one another, there are sparks. The Mainstream tend to doubt the authenticity of the Emergent, but they’re usually too polite, or too politically correct, to say so out loud. The Abandoned accuse the Emergent—the immigrant segment, at least—of moving into Abandoned neighborhoods and using locals as mere stepping-stones. The immigrant Emergent, with their intact families and long-range mind-set, ridicule the Abandoned for being their own worst enemies. The Mainstream bemoan the plight of the Abandoned—but express their concern from a distance. The Transcendent, to steal the old line about Boston society, speak only to God; they are idolized by the Mainstream and the Emergent for the obstacles they have overcome, and by the Abandoned for the shiny things they own. Mainstream, Emergent, and Transcendent all lock their car doors when they drive through an Abandoned neighborhood. They think the Abandoned don’t hear the disrespectful *thunk* of the locks; they’re wrong!⁴⁷

In *New Wine New Wineskins*, F. Douglas Powe Jr. expanded this concept of the splintering black community through his explanation of the generational differences that made exchange in the black church difficult. Utilizing Strauss and Howe’s explication of the different generations (Boomers, Millennials, etc.), he transposed those distinctions,

⁴⁶ Robinson, *Disintegration*, 5.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 6.

reworked them, and added to them the nuances of black life and the various elemental shifts in black culture that have precipitated the decline of the black church and the further splintering of the black community.⁴⁸

In *Is Bill Cosby Right(?)*, Michael Eric Dyson called the privileged, professional and elite groups the Afristocracy, while the less privileged working class and poor made up the Ghattocracy.⁴⁹ Dyson wrote the book in response to Bill Cosby's controversial remarks about poor blacks during a gala celebrating the fiftieth anniversary of *Brown vs. Board of Education* in 2004, and then again at an event sponsored by the Rainbow/PUSH Coalition. At these events, Cosby accused poor blacks of a litany of ill practices including, the names given to children, illiteracy, using "bad" grammar, wasteful spending, and a host of other issues.⁵⁰

Dyson commented saying, "Cosby's comments don't exist in a cultural or political vacuum. His views have traction in conservative (and some liberal) circles because they bolster the belief that less money, political action, and societal intervention—and more hard work and responsibility—are the key to black success."⁵¹

Such increasing tensions within black communities made the rise of Hip-Hop deeply significant not simply within the context of the African American community, but

⁴⁸ F. Douglas Jr. Powe, *New Wine, New Wineskins: How African American Congregations Can Reach New Generations* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2012), 7.

⁴⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York, NY: BasicCivitas, 2005), xiii-xiv.

⁵⁰ Janice Shaw Crouse, "Cosby Campaign Sets Off His Critics," Concerned Women for America, November 18, 2004, accessed January 23, 2014, <http://www.cwfa.org/cosbys-campaign-sets-off-his-critics/>.

⁵¹ Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right?*, 10.

also in American history at large. Through Hip-Hop the consumer observed the rise of a demographic that was systematically oppressed, underrepresented, and overall mistreated.

Moreover, there was a powerful underlying hermeneutic of redemption, salvation, and restoration that served as a powerful framework for church ministry. Hip-Hop posited for the church the perfect opportunity to communicate God's redeeming grace to those who were forsaken yet in some sense preserved and restored. Yet it's seemed the successes of the civil rights movement caused the church to ride off into the sunset with the rest of the Afristocracy. This begged the question, what was the stance of the black church and where was she in the midst of all of this transition and change?

Powe argued the black church was busy doing ministry based upon those systems that made the civil rights and black power movements successful. Meanwhile, the wider society moved on to a more creative, progressive, unorthodox practice and the black church was no longer the "de facto center of the community."⁵² In *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya suggested that the church was a dynamic institution; constantly "moving back and forth in response to certain issues."⁵³ This perspective shed light on the tension that Dyson addressed in *Between God and Gangsta Rap* when he said, "From where I stand now—as a committed preacher and public intellectual constantly analyzing and addressing the crises of black life—black culture is constantly being redefined between the force of religious identities

⁵² Powe, *New Wine New Wineskins*, 17.

⁵³ C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 1990), 15.

and secular passions. Somewhere between God and gangsta rap.”⁵⁴ At best the church seemed to attempt to manage the tension: and at other times appears deeply conflicted.

A case is found in the context of black Seventh-day Adventism. A 1996 “assessment” study of black Adventism entitled *Perspectives*, yielded a polarized view of Afrocentrism.⁵⁵ Throughout the passage the authors were at odds given Afrocentrism’s ambitious aims for black communities and their rejection of the Christ-centered worldview.⁵⁶ On the other hand the text praised Afrocentrism’s inherent value of challenging the sociopolitical underpinnings and understanding of biblical Christianity and spirituality based on mature concepts of the curse of Ham, the role of African peoples in the development of Christianity, and the influence of one’s understanding of African geography and its relation to understanding faith.⁵⁷ In other words, the church was processing its response and did not know how to proceed., Since the church was “the womb of the black community,” according to Lincoln and Mamiya, the masses awaited a concerted response as to how to address the changes and challenges within the black community; especially as it related to the inner city?⁵⁸ With such vast splintering in black communities, how did the church retain it’s standing as the home base of black communities?

⁵⁴ Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, USA, 1997), xviii.

⁵⁵ Carol Cantu, Andrew Harewood, and William Frazier, “Black Seventh-day Adventists and Afrocentrism,” in *Perspectives: Black Seventh-Day Adventists Face the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Calvin B. Rock (Hagerstown, MD: Review & Herald, 1996), 101-5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 104.

⁵⁸ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 8.

In *The Black Church in the Post Civil Rights Era*, Anthony Pinn suggested that the church died and lost its voice in the same period that Hip-Hop was beginning to thrive for numerous reasons including, lost emphasis on civil rights, increasing secularization, rejection of intellectual critique and dialogue, and the growth of Islam.⁵⁹ He quoted a song by conscious nineties Hip-Hop group Arrested Development that critiqued the church for the disengaged manner in which it attempted to help people cope with their problems.⁶⁰ The assessment suggested that was that prayer was meaningless without social activism. In a much more personal account, rapper Jay-Z, in his book *Decoded*, admitted that although his grandfather was a COGIC minister, “Church wasn’t a major part of my life growing up, as it was for my father.”⁶¹ Jay-Z’s words come across as if his father was aloof because his grandfather overdid it with church. Hence, the main interactions he had with church were in the public squares along with a myriad of vying faith traditions where he saw the “Pentecostals arguing scripture with the Jehovah’s Witnesses.”⁶² It appeared that in the context of the endless dialectic, the church was alienating the younger generations; especially those in the urban centers.

Yet another example of this dialectic within the church was manifested in the church’s response to changes in liturgical approaches and sacred music. This debate has been fraught with countless church board battles and even church splits. In *Sacred Music in the Secular City* there was a thorough treating of the progression of the Black musical

⁵⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The Black Church in the Post-Civil Rights Era* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2002), 18-27.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 20-1.

⁶¹ Jay-Z, *Decoded* (New York, NY: Spiegel & Grau, 2011), 276.

⁶² Ibid., 276.

experience. Seeking to assert the theological foundation of Black Music in the urban secular context, the book posited, “If music...excites in beings emotions that it expresses, then ought not there be a theology for those affections...?”⁶³ Melva Costen extended this idea even further when she said, “Traditional religions pervade all aspects of life, thereby eliminating a formal distinction between sacred and secular.”⁶⁴ She spoke specifically of African religious traditions and since “Africa is the anchor that holds music as the thread that runs through the fabric of the African-American existence,” it stands to reason that this sacred and secular divide was not as evident as some might assume.⁶⁵

James Cone stretched this idea further when he contended that the blues were a secular outgrowth of the ethos of the spirituals.⁶⁶ He argued that the blues were both sacred and secular saying, “They are secular in the sense that they confine their attention to the immediate and affirm the bodily expression of black soul, including its sexual manifestations. They are spirituals because they are impelled by the same search for the truth of black experience.”⁶⁷

However, this perspective was not without contention; especially in the black SDA church. One black, SDA music professor Eurydice Osterman intimated the supposed danger in “mixing the holy with the profane” when she said, “Music that has a

⁶³ Jon Michael Spencer, ed., *Sacred Music of the Secular City: From Blues to Rap*, vol. 6, *Sacred Music of the Secular City*, Black Sacred Music (Durham, NC: Duke University, 1992), 28.

⁶⁴ Melva Wilson Costen, *In Spirit and in Truth: the Music of African American Worship* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004), 1.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 3.

⁶⁶ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: an Interpretation*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), 100.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

worldly association benumbs the mind by appealing to the carnal nature, and hence, evokes physical reactions that minimize the intellectual contemplation that is necessary to discern and understand spiritual precepts.”⁶⁸ On the other hand, SDA theologian Pedrito Maynard-Reid argued, “Music in black thought, reflecting the African worldview, cannot be easily compartmentalized into sacred and secular categories. Such dichotomized labels fail to recognize the wholism that is essential to black life and thought.”⁶⁹

Cheryl Wilson-Bridges promoted a merging of the sacred and secular citing the use of this method in the development of several of the psalms and great hymns of the church.⁷⁰ However, Wilson-Bridges applied a conflicted qualification to this strategy suggesting that the music employed utilized “Persuasive lyrics that invade the mind with the glory and majesty of God can be combined with pure melodies that stimulate Spirit-filled emotions such as love, joy, peace, and happiness. In true worship God unites the eternal homage of the human and the heavenly through melody.”⁷¹

Aside from the fact that love, joy and peace were not actually emotions, one must question if it was actually God’s means to unite sacred and secular through specific types of melody? On the other hand, Errol Stoddart presented a contrasting approach to this issue. In *The Silent Shout*, Stoddart argued acceptable types of melody down to its central core issue when he said, “Any attempt to force the wider Christian community to accept

⁶⁸ Eurydice V. Osterman, *What God Says About Music* (Huntsville, AL: Awsahm Music, 1998), 22.

⁶⁹ Pedrito U. Maynard-Reid, *Diverse Worship: African-American, Caribbean and Hispanic Perspectives* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2000), 70.

⁷⁰ Cheryl Wilson-Bridges, *Levite Praise* (Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2009), 101-3.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 103.

European music as the standard worship music was idolatrous. It is setting ones culture in a position of superiority above all other cultures. This was not the kind of music sung in ancient Israel, or by the apostles in the early church.”⁷² Stoddart went on to explain how racist ideals have shaped our approach to the issue of determining what was acceptable music. He argued that each culture’s music choice should reflect the culture of its users. He added, “The insistence that worship music meet the criteria of European artistic definitions is totally without scriptural support, and biased by the same old colonial mindset.”⁷³

The dialectic continues to develop around cultural issues and perspectives. Hence, there is a need to look more closely at a theology of culture. There is a need to better understand the complexities and pervasiveness of culture—even within the confines of the United States. Nevertheless, it appears that the gridlock of theory and hermeneutics restricted the progress in the quest for engagement with those who have never heard. Notwithstanding there have been those within the realm of Christendom who sought to reach out to this growing number of urban youth with the message of God’s grace.

Evangelism professor and sociologist Ralph Watkins wrote of his incarnational mission of becoming a DJ in order to better engage Hip-Hop culture. He wrote, “I had to know the world to reach the world. I had to go to the nation of hip hop and become an

⁷² Errol T. Stoddart, *The Silent Shout*. 2 vols. (Lansdowne, PA: Ecnerret Publishing Co., 2001), 163.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 167.

honorary citizen to be able to extend an invitation to them to become a member of the kingdom.”⁷⁴ In another book *Hip-Hop Redemption*, Watkins stated:

Hip-hop is the child of the blues. The child that has grown up must look back at the parent, and a dialogue must be established. The dialogue isn't the parent lecturing the adult child; rather, it is an appreciation of each other as the parent looks across the table at the child who is all grown up. There must be some pride on the part of the parent for what the child has become. But along with the pride is a tension. The child has become its own being, and the parent is tempted to critique the child. This critique is necessary; this tension is a part of the relationship. This tension can't be avoided. Both pride and critique are needed if they are going to understand each other and appreciate each other for the ways that they are similar and different.⁷⁵

Watkins's ideas signaled a turn in the dialectic.

There appears to be a quiet riot amongst Christians wanting to engage secular culture for the sake of expanding the gospel. For others, ministry to Hip-Hop culture is simply an outgrowth of their own personal and spiritual development journey. Efrem Smith, co-author of the book *The Hip-Hop Church* reflected, “Though I am now the senior pastor of the Covenant Church in Minneapolis, I consider myself a hip-hopper as well. I grew up on hip-hop and in the church...So in some ways, I was raised by hip-hop.”⁷⁶ Smith's co-author Phil Jackson recalled his Hip-Hop watershed moment while reflecting on Melle Mel's lyrics in “The Message” after the funeral of a friend.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Ralph C. Watkins et al., *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (West Monroe, LA: Judson Press, 2007), xvi.

⁷⁵ Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 131.

⁷⁶ Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 19.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 21.

Some rappers turned into pastors and ministry leaders. Tommy Kyllonen expressed a deep conviction concerning he and his leadership team's call to create a faith community that sought to address the needs of people in their community deeply affected by Hip-Hop culture.⁷⁸ Several ministries and churches across the country are intentional about reaching Hip-Hop culture in cities like Harlem, Oakland, Philadelphia and Atlanta. Even pioneer rapper Kurtis Blow founded and became pastor of The Hip-Hop Church in Harlem, New York.⁷⁹

It was rapper, Jay-Z who said, "I think for hip-hop to grow to it's potential and stay relevant for another generation we have to keep pushing deeper and deeper into the biggest subjects and doing it with real honesty. The truth is always relevant."⁸⁰ Even though postmodern culture attempted to challenge the very concept of truth itself, even Jay-Z admitted that truth is relevant and valuable to Hip-Hop culture. Therefore, the church must forge new paths in the future to continue to pursue truth with Hip-Hop culture. The very life of the church depends on these new missionary frontiers.

⁷⁸ Tommy Kyllonen, *Un.orthodox: Church. Hip-Hop. Culture.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 62.

⁷⁹ "Minister of the Gospel Kurtis Blow Walker Debuts Hiphopministry.com Web-Portal," HolyHipHop.com, October 11, 2006, accessed January 26, 2014, <http://www.holyhiphop.com/hiphopministrywebsitedebut.htm>.

⁸⁰ Jay-Z, *Decoded*, 279.

CHAPTER FOUR

THEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

A thorough study of Hip-Hop culture and the need for evangelization to Hip-Hop culture gives occasion for discussion about the doctrine of incarnation. The doctrine of the incarnation was an area of Christology that affirmed God's self-revelation in the person and work of Jesus Christ. It was Leo the Great who defined the incarnation by calling it, "God bending Himself to the weak things of man, and man rising up to the high things of the Godhead."¹ The entire universe was reordered when God came in the form Christ. As a human—a man, who was at first a baby, born as a Jew at a specific time in history, Christ completely redefined how humanity saw and understood the revelation of God. For this reason careful exploration of the incarnation yields deep truths that inform ministry praxis.

In order to become human in Christ, God relinquished omnipresence and was confined to time and space. To this point Martin Manser added, "The incarnation [was] the fixed and permanent physical dwelling of God in his world..."² To be confined to

¹ Leo the Great, "Letters," in *A Select Library of the Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church, Second Series: Leo the Great, Gregory the Great*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, trans. Charles Lett Feltoe, vol. 12a (New York, NY: Christian Literature Company, 1895), 95.

time and space meant that God became local and accessible. Not to everyone on the earth; yet, truly accessible to all of those who were local and present. Evidencing a divine prioritization for relationship, God intended to forge deep bonds with humanity. In spite of the fact that “no one [had] ever seen God” Christ now made it possible for men to not only see God, but to also touch God, and receive direct physical expressions of love from God.

It was here that the great debate concerning the nature and divinity of Christ ensued. Some scholars asserted the idea of the living Christ being the Son God come in human flesh as a myth complete with metaphor and analogy—a sort of living parable intended as “a symbol pointing to God.”³ More specifically, James Dunn cited Bultmann as saying that the doctrine of the incarnation stemmed from a gnostic myth of “a light-person sent from by the highest god...from the light-world bringing gnosis.”⁴ Along with this group were those who argued that there could be no actual emptying of the divine nature.⁵ Yet, other scholars argued for two natures, and some for a sort of repressed divinity.⁶ Pannenberg added a more complex construction saying, “...out of his eternity, God has through the resurrection of Jesus, which has always been present to his eternity,

² Martin H. Manser, *Dictionary of Bible Themes: The Accessible and Comprehensive Tool for Topical Studies* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009).

³ Robert G. Crawford, *Saga of God Incarnate* (Pretoria, ZA: Unisa Press, 1985), 3.

⁴ Rudolf Bultmann, *Theology of the New Testament* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 166, quoted in James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: a New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 98.

⁵ John Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate: Christology in a Pluralistic Age*, 2nd ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 61-71.

⁶ Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Jesus--God and Man, Second Edition*, 2 ed. (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster John Knox Press, 1977), 307-23.

entered into a unity with this one man, which was at first hidden. This unity illuminated Jesus' life in advance, but it's basis and reality were revealed only by his resurrection."⁷

In the midst of all of this, N.T. Wright illuminated the irony within the debates that the church believed more deeply in the second coming than the incarnation; that Jesus was divine only when he returned and not when he died or rose from the dead.⁸

Wright also chided the limitations of historicism and a dismissive approach to the god statements of Jesus.⁹

The debate was vast and intricate, which caused many to seek to simplify the conversation in an effort to compare and contrast the varying perspectives. Paul Molnar has composed a sort of theological survey to compare the views of Barth, Torrance, Hick, Pannenberg and others. Though there was great debate concerning the Christology of the early Christians and apostles Barth argued that their theology "always ended with the knowledge of Christ's deity because it had already begun there."¹⁰ On the other hand Karl Rahner argued, "Today Jesus Christ is himself a problem...in what sense may one risk his life in faith on this concrete Jesus of Nazareth as the crucified and risen God-Man? This is what has to be justified. Hence we cannot begin with Jesus Christ...we

⁷ Ibid., 322.

⁸ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God: Christian Origins and the Question of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1997), 660-61.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics Vol. 1 Pt.1*, ed. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance, trans. G.W. Bromiley (Edinburgh, SCT: T&T Clark, 1975), 412, quoted in Paul Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 3.

must begin further back than that.”¹¹ Rahner suggested that transcendental experience, or man’s eternal evolutionary reaching toward God, met its full expression in Christ.¹²

Similar to the framework of Barth was Torrance who contended, “that the incarnation is to be understood as God really become man. Jesus Christ is not just man participating in God but is himself essential Deity.”¹³ Yet, there was still the work of Hick wherein he claimed “Jesus as God the Son incarnate is not literally true, since it has no literal meaning, but it is an application to Jesus of a mythical concept whose function is analogous to that of the notion of divine sonship ascribed in the ancient world to a king.”¹⁴

Notwithstanding the tension, there was an agreement on both sides that the incarnation represented God’s willing “involvement in human life. Thus in acting within human history...God is present with us in the flow of time...human life and history are important to God, who is at all times ‘Immanuel’, God with us.”¹⁵ This remained the focus of this particular work. It was not the specific nature of Christ that was at the center of discussion here, but rather the manner in which he engaged humanity.

¹¹ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York, NY: Seabury, 1978), 13, quoted in Paul Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 48.

¹² Paul D. Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2007), 68-77.

¹³ T.F. Torrance, *The Trinitarian Faith: The Evangelical Theology of the Ancient Catholic Church* (Edinburgh, SCT: T&T Clark, 1988), 149, quoted in Paul Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1988), 89.

¹⁴ John Hick, ed., *The Myth of God Incarnate* (London: SCM Press, 1977), 178, quoted in Paul Molnar, *Incarnation and Resurrection: Toward a Contemporary Understanding* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2007), 249.

¹⁵ Hick, *The Metaphor of God Incarnate*, 9.

In order to become fully human Christ was subject to sin. As was already discussed, this was an area of great contention for the church for many centuries.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the scriptures still said, "...we do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have one who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin."¹⁷ Christ came close to humanity that he might be directly involved with and touched by fallen humanity. Nonetheless, in Christ, we have the perfect model of righteousness because despite the weakness of heredity and human desire, he maintained his own righteousness. In *Seeing Christ*, Calvin Rock stated "Jesus overcame destructive emotions, unhealthy appetites, all stimuli to excess, each desire to neglect, every temptation to self-exultation and retaliation that ruminates in the human mind. He maintained the absolute character perfection in which he was born."¹⁸ Ellen G. White's *The Desire of Ages* supported this point stating, "The law requires righteousness,—a righteous life, a perfect character; and this man has not to give. He cannot meet the claims of God's holy law. But Christ, coming to earth as man, lived a holy life, and developed a perfect character. These he offers as a free gift to all who will receive them. His life stands for the life of men."¹⁹

One contention lay in the idea that if he "knew no sin" then he could not be fully human, for "all have sinned." Yet to this Dunn responded with Rom. 1:22 and Adam

¹⁶ Williston Walker et al., *A History of the Christian Church*, 4th ed. (New York, NY: Scribner, 1985), 173.

¹⁷ Hebrews 4:15 NRSV

¹⁸ Calvin Rock, *Seeing Christ: Windows On His Saving Grace* (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 1994), 107.

¹⁹ Ellen G. White, *The Desire of Ages*, Gift ed. (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press Pub Assn, 1982), 762.

theology saying, “the language is used to describe the character of Christ, but precisely of Christ evaluated theologically as Adam; his life proved him to be in form as man. Notice, not ‘as a man’, but as man—that is, as representative man, as one with fallen man, as Adam.”²⁰ In other words, Christ must become one with humanity in order to be the representative for humanity.

As a human, God, in Christ was subject to the physical limits of human flesh. Jesus got tired, became hungry, caught a virus or cold, and felt the effects of eating too much. As a human, God became subject to mortality. From the very beginning of his earthly life, Jesus was under the constant threat of physical harm and even death. Even after his death and resurrection, he continued to bare the wounds of his human flesh. When he appeared to his disciples after the resurrection, he showed them his scars and invited them to “Put your finger here and see my hands. Reach out your hand and put it in my side...”²¹ He had already been resurrected and therefore healed, however he chose not to be changed. In this, Christ indelibly tied himself to all of bruised and scarred humanity.

The death of Christ alone was the greatest form of solidarity. It was the scourge of humanity and all of fallen creation. The devastating end of life in death is hardly ever welcome. Death should be grouped with the list of things like sin and hate that are against the nature of God. It is most often met with despair, agony and the most severe emotional pain. Death, in this sense, was foreign to God. Yet, Christ, out of love for humanity and

²⁰ James D.G. Dunn, *Christology in the Making: a New Testament Inquiry Into the Origins of the Doctrine of the Incarnation*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 118.

²¹ John 20:27 NRSV

for “the joy that was set before him, endured the cross, disregarding its shame.”²² He extended himself beyond the boundaries of divinity into the dark recesses of humanity in order to share this experience with the fallen. Moltmann added:

Humiliation to the point of death on the cross corresponds to God’s nature in the contradiction of abandonment. When the crucified Jesus is called the ‘image of the invisible God’, the meaning is that this is God. God is like this. God is not greater than he is in this humiliation. God is not more glorious than he is in this humiliation. God is not more powerful than he is in this helplessness. God is not more divine than he is in this humanity.²³

It was here that humanity found supreme solace in Christ – the Cross. He was not simply savior in that he died for us. He was companion in that he died alongside us. Just as we were vulnerable, the Almighty God of heaven became vulnerable.

When we consider this concept of vulnerability, we must not miss the significance of God in the form of a baby. Never before had God been more vulnerable than the moment the Heavenly King took on the form of an infant. There are few symbols to manifest a greater kind of vulnerability. The baby Jesus in his mother’s womb as a newborn depended upon the faculty and care of Mary and Joseph to meet his every need. He came to serve, but in the earliest years, his earthly parents served him. They fed him, bathed him, dressed him, and protected him. “The heart of the human father (Joseph) yearns over his son. He looks into the face of his little child, and trembles at the thought of life’s peril. He longs to shield his dear one from Satan’s power, to hold him back from

²² Hebrews 12:2 NRSV

²³ Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1993), 205.

temptation and conflict...God gave his only-begotten son, that the path of life might be made sure for our little ones.”²⁴

Their protection was an immediate need and instinct of his parents at the very beginning. Herod had heard of the birth of this “King” and determined to preserve his own posterity by destroying Christ. A night vision, parental instinct and the anonymity of Egyptian respite saved the very life of the one who was indeed the source of life. God in Christ became subject to the perils of the impoverished. Nevertheless, as God in Christ became vulnerable, he also rose victorious.

Though Herod sought his life, he escaped to Egypt. The Pharisees wanted to stone him and throw him off a cliff, but he vanished from their sight.²⁵ He was crucified on the cross on Friday, but he was resurrected on Sunday morning. Christ joined with humanity in the process of death. Then Christ joined humanity to himself in the victory of resurrection. The results of sin were manifested in Israel’s enslavement to Egypt. Now, Christ in the victory over sin and death expressed the fulfillment of the promise of ultimate liberation.²⁶ Before he could deliver humanity, he submitted to the will of the father and became one with humanity. He, like all humans, was born as a baby and died as a man. It was through his birth that God the theme of the Christmas holiday and the advent season of the liturgical calendar was established. The Immaculate Conception reached its crescendo in the birth of the Savior. The mystery of the event was beyond

²⁴ Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 49.

²⁵ Luke 4:28-30; John 8:59, 10:30-39

²⁶ Alister McGrath, *Incarnation* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2006), 6.

compare. However, the greatest confusion rested in the words of his earthly mother Mary when she asked, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”²⁷

Mary questioned the plausibility of such an event not only given her virginity, but also concerning the enormity of the responsibility. She was not a queen, nor was she of noble birth. She had no pedigree and was most likely not educated. Nevertheless, the majestic God of glory identified with this young maiden and chose her to bare the Christ child. She humbly accepted saying, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”²⁸ As a Jewish peasant, she identified with the concept of servant, yet in this she acquiesced into a servant of the almighty God.

Luke’s gospel began with the story of Mary and Elizabeth’s visitation, but it was Matthew who began by showing the lineage of Jesus. In accepting the task to be born to an earthly mother and father, Jesus was injected into the social structure and politics of a specific family tree. He had a family name, household and heritage that required honoring. He had uncles and aunts, cousins, nieces and nephews; all who expected him to interact and engage in the familial exchanges of love, loss, fellowship, celebration, sickness and sorrow.

Matthew’s account documented a few names that held special significance. Both Rahab and Ruth were women with not-so-respectable reputations. David was known as a man after God’s own heart, yet he proved to allow his passions to derail him in major ways. Jesus’s family tree was normal. It was filled with sinners and those who needed God’s grace. He was one of many to whom the sins of the fathers had been passed down

²⁷ Luke 1:34b NRSV

²⁸ Luke 1:38 NRSV

to the third and fourth generation.²⁹ Therefore, he sympathized with those who were predisposed to fall into certain snares given their family history. “Like every child of Adam he accepted the workings of the great law of heredity. What these results were is shown in the history of his earthly ancestors. He came with such an heredity to share our sorrows and temptations...”³⁰

Jesus’s family history was just that history. Jesus’s birth placed him in a specific place in time. At numerous places within the gospel corpus Jesus was engaged with historical figures and events. He engaged Cesar’s tax policies. As a matter of fact, it was on the occasion of taxation survey in the form of a census that brought Mary and Joseph to Jesus’s birthplace of Bethlehem.³¹ He barked at Herod’s poor politics with a derogatory remark.³² Also, in Luke 13, he was asked to weigh in on the atrocities of the current Roman governor Pontius Pilate. At Jesus’s trial in Pilate’s court, tensions between Pilate and the emperor are highlighted in the Jews’ apparent threat and reference to friendship to Cesar.

In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of heaven was clashing with the kingdoms of the world and dialoguing with them according to specific events and issues.³³ It was

²⁹ Exodus 20:5

³⁰ Ellen G. White, *Desire of Ages*, 49.

³¹ Charles Bricker et al., *Jesus and His Times*, ed. Kaari Ward (Pleasantville, NY: Reader's Digest, 1987), 13-14

³² “Herod the Fox Luke 13-32,” Stack Exchange, September 15, 2013, accessed February 10, 2014, <http://hermeneutics.stackexchange.com/questions/5886/herod-the-fox-luke-13-32>.

³³ N.T. Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus: Rediscovering Who Jesus Was and Is* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1999), 49-50.

evident that Jesus's life was affected by these historical figures and events, but he also affected history all the more.

Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River and was eventually crucified on a cross. These are historical events that are tied to specific geographical locations.³⁴ Jesus was an active agent in historical places that ultimately left an indelible mark on people and historical events. Despite the debate of the veracity of the resurrection, one must admit that one way or the other the resurrection greatly altered the course of human history.³⁵³⁶

It is often said that, "all theology is local." Over the course of his earthly ministry, Jesus never traveled more than one hundred miles from his place of birth. As an itinerant preacher and local theologian, Jesus was able to help the people who heard him and touched him to gain a clear understanding of the revelation of God. He had international appeal, yet he was not an international globetrotter. He was present with the people who were descendants of a common ancestry, and that was where he focused his work. Fully invested in his local community and surrounding area, those who were closest to him knew that if they could touched him or gained his favor their lives would be changed forever.

Because Jesus was a part of history and a resident of a specific place(s), he was immediately impacted by the wide array of social and cultural issues that were prevalent to his fellow Jews. It is necessary to note here that Jesus was most assuredly Jewish. As a

³⁴ James D.G. Dunn, *Jesus Remembered* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2003), 339.

³⁵ Howard Clark Kee, *Jesus in History: an Approach to the Study of the Gospels*, 2d ed. (New York, NY: Harcourt College Pub, 1977), 299.

³⁶ Wright, *The Challenge of Jesus*, 93.

Jew, Jesus “went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was his custom.”³⁷ He knew that he was committing faux pas by speaking with the woman at the well, which might have been one reason he didn’t respond to the disciples when they whispered amongst each other about it. He knew that the woman who was caught in adultery was punishable of death by stoning at the hands of the people. Therefore, he did not reject the notion of stoning he simply turned its application towards her accusers.

At the wedding at Cana, Jesus performed a miracle to save the family a grave embarrassment. Jesus was well acquainted with customs related to family celebrations and hospitality. It would have been a major embarrassment for the hosting family to have not made sufficient preparations for the guests. Jesus’s miracle served as a simple act of mercy to help a family navigate social expectations. Contrastingly, he also rejected cultural norms in an effort to provide pastoral care to those in need as he did with the widow of Nain. Willard Erickson stated that on this particular occasion, “He then violated rabbinic practice by stopping the funeral procession and touching the coffin. It was his mission to help the helpless.”³⁸

Jesus engaged people in those ways because his power was not merely in word and deed, but also in his presence. His very presence was his power. As a Jew, Christ sought to be present with those he intended to save. In *Jesus of Nazareth*, Gunther Bornkamm wrote, “Jesus [did] not only teach in the synagogues, but also in the open field, on the shores of the lake, during his wanderings. And his followers [were] a strange

³⁷ Luke 4:16b NRSV

³⁸ Millard J. Erickson, *Word Became Flesh, The: a Contemporary Incarnational Christology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 596.

crowd. Even those people are amongst them who an official rabbi would do his best to avoid: women and children, tax collectors, and sinners.”³⁹

Jesus also manifested sensitivity to hospitality customs when he rebuked Simon the Pharisee for not providing a foot washing service for guests as they arrived.⁴⁰ Then again at the Last Supper, Jesus took up a basin and a towel and proceeded to wash the disciples feet. Then the disciples, namely Peter, were taken aback because Jesus assumed the posture of a gentle servant. It was evident that Jesus’s intimate knowledge and connection to Jewish customs gave him regular occasion to address misconceptions of the misguided with word and deed. Bornkamm argued that this is what set Jesus apart from the other rabbis. He did not speak exclusively from or about the scriptures, but rather from the immediate present in order that his hearers might have direct access to his wisdom.⁴¹ Bornkamm continued:

In all these utterances Jesus draws into the service of his message the world of nature and the life of man, and those everyday experiences which everyone knows and shares, without using the established structure of sacred traditions and texts. The listener is never obliged to look for premises which would give meaning to Jesus’ teaching, or to recall the theory about doctrines and traditions which he would be supposed to know beforehand.⁴²

It was through his words that Jesus manifested divine grace towards humanity. Jesus was indeed the word made flesh, and he spoke words of life to his hearers. Nevertheless, as a Jew he spoke in a language that was easily understood by his hearers.

³⁹ Günther Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1995), 57.

⁴⁰ Luke 4:44

⁴¹ Bornkamm, *Jesus of Nazareth*, 57-58

⁴² *Ibid.*, 58.

The gospels record several occasions where Jesus spoke in Aramaic—the common language of the day amongst Jews.⁴³ It was very important for Jesus to speak Aramaic. In first century Palestine the Romans were the ruling power yet, Greek had become the language of the academy and commerce. However, most Jews didn't speak Greek. In order to communicate with the masses, Jesus spoke the language of the people. It could also be safely assumed that in using the native tongue he used common Jewish idioms in order to communicate effectively. Jesus usually taught in parables as another means of utilizing common Jewish culture in an effort to illustrate and inaugurate the kingdom of God.⁴⁴

Christ aligned himself with his creation through the incarnation in every aspect of human life and local culture; both in death and resurrection. James Cone summed it up best when he said:

If the history of Israel and the New Testament description of the historical Jesus reveal that God is a God who is identified with Israel because it is an oppressed community, the resurrection of Jesus means that all oppressed peoples become his people. Herein lies the universal note implied in the gospel of Jesus. The resurrection-event means that God liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers.⁴⁵

In conclusion, the incarnation was God's most poetic and powerful expression of redemptive purpose. God was not revealed to everyone in every place. Rather, he was revealed as someone in one place. Jesus Christ was a particular person, born to a

⁴³ Matthew 5:22, 6:24, 27:46; Mark 5:41, 7:34, 14:36

⁴⁴ N.T. Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, 171-82

⁴⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th Anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 3-4.

particular, family, in a particular place, at a particular time. Because of this, he engaged the issues and challenges that were critical to that specific family in that particular local context. He addressed the Roman infrastructure, the self-righteous Pharisees, the dearth of quality healthcare, and so on. As a real person, in a real place, at a real point in time, Jesus related to real human issues and in so doing made himself relevant to real people everywhere striving to make it through life. By trying to relate to everyone, Jesus would not have related to anyone in any substantive way. Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death—even death on a cross.”⁴⁶ When Jesus became a human he made himself subservient to the issues of oppressed people. He lived with them, suffered with them, listened to them, taught them, healed them, laughed with them, and celebrated with them. Then he died with them, and in dying with them, he died for them. Resurrecting on Sunday empowered him to bring to them the gift of eternal life and deliverance from sin and death.

God in Christ was patient enough to literally live among those who needing saving. All methods concerning the work of Salvation should take their cues from greatest hands-on approach to ministry ever practiced. The beautiful efficacy of Immanuel—God with us – was the almighty power of the God being revealed in relationship. It was in the “with” that the powerful exchange took place. When God’s servants decide to become incarnate “with” those who would be saved, then there will be greater results in the work.

⁴⁶ Philippians 2:7-8 NRSV

CHAPTER FIVE

THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS

Dr. John Cochran served as the pastor of Trinity Lutheran Church in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania for over twenty years. As he neared his retirement, he reflected on his ministry in the urban center saying, “Doing ministry in the city is like pastoring a parade.” Pastor Cochran’s comment highlighted the revolving door of urban neighborhoods wherein impoverished and depressed people were constantly moving about without real plans of stability. Now imagine that this parade had obscene music, scantily clad “video vixens.” Suddenly, shooting interrupts the parade. Spectators duck for cover and escape to their cars. According to Cochran that was ministry to Hip-Hop culture. This analogy embodied all the trappings of ministry to the urban center with a vile, edgier and riskier element. Nevertheless, ministers must find a means of effectively ministering these souls towards redemptive and transformative change within Hip-Hop culture.

Several models serve as theoretical frameworks for a balanced approach to Hip-Hop ministry. In the book *Christ and Culture*, H. Richard Niebuhr surveyed various approaches that the Christian church employed in seeking to find an effective way to relate to secular society and propagate the faith. When considering ministry to Hip-Hop it would be beneficial to accept a paradigm that suggests Christ was the transformer of culture as opposed to the concepts of “Christ of,” “above,” “against” culture, or the

“paradox” of culture.¹ Among other convictions was the belief in the incarnation; which compelled us to imagine that because “The Word...became flesh and dwelt among us, the Son who does the work of the Father in the world of creation, has entered into a human culture that has never been without his ordering action.”² Therefore, Christ was active and engaged in the plan of salvation, redemption and restoration for any and every culture. It became the work of ministry to partner with God in this process of engaging people where they were for the sake of God’s kingdom.

Closely related to this model was the work of Jon Paulien in *Present Truth in the Real World*. Paulien, like Niebuhr, identified multiple approaches that the church took throughout the years as a model for ministry. Paulien identified what he called the “Fortress Model” and the “Salt Model.”³ In the Fortress Model, “Every so often the inhabitants of such a city may send out the army to conduct a ‘crusade.’ They open the gates quickly, rush out to snatch up a few captives, bring them back in through the gate, and slam the door.”⁴ This was the model that dominated the landscape of Seventh-day Adventist evangelism praxis.

Comparatively, was the “Salt Model”—“It’s a quiet ministry, and infiltration ministry. But the ‘salt model’ takes one outside the walls of protection.”⁵ Just as salt mingles with the food in order to change its flavor, so should those who intend to have

¹ H. Richard Niebuhr, *Christ and Culture* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1975), 190-229.

² Ibid., 193.

³ Jon Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World: the Adventist Struggle to Keep and Share Faith in a Secular Society* (Boise, ID: Pacific Pr Pub Assn, 1993), 80-83.

⁴ Ibid., 81.

⁵ Ibid., 82.

impact in secular society mix and mingle towards a redemptive end. In the book *Out of the Saltshaker and into the World*, Rebecca Pippert argued that believers must stop seeking fail safe “tracts and techniques” as a means to win people to the kingdom and determine to win them with a heart filled with love and a life that reflects the character and manifold grace of God.⁶ Pippert asserted, “The way we treat others reveals what we think God is like... The way we treat others is critical. People will understand as much of the love of God as they see in our own lives. The first Bible many people will read will be your life.”⁷ There is no way we can be truly win some Hip-Hoppers if our lives are not congruent with the gospel that we preach, nor our love reflective of the Jesus we claim to serve.

Paulien further addressed the need to create “subcultures” within the church structure in order to welcome new people who might not normally feel welcome.⁸ Today, this might be identified as a small group, yet it spoke to the period of decline that Gary McIntosh talked about in *Taking Your Church to the Next Level*. Many leaders waited until the church was already in decline to try to make changes toward revival. “But it is when the church is doing well that church leaders must develop a new vision and direction for ministry if they wish to avoid the pattern of plateau and decline.”⁹ In *Look Back Leap Forward*, McIntosh lays out a framework for re-envisioning the church’s

⁶ Rebecca Manley Pippert, *Out of the Saltshaker and Into the World: Evangelism as a Way of Life* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1979), 34.

⁷ Ibid., 76.

⁸ Paulien, *Present Truth in the Real World*, 203-8.

⁹ Gary L. McIntosh, *Taking Your Church to the Next Level: What Got You Here Won't Get You There* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2009), 99.

future with a strategic visioning process that includes team building, values assessment, goal setting, resources alignment, and more.¹⁰ The goal was to determine a strategic plan of active engagement toward change and growth. Ephesus was right in the midst of this re-envisioning process. However, it had yet to be determined if the church's values and resources were aligned with reaching the youth, the lost and the unchurched like those within Hip-Hop culture.

In *Democracy Matters*, Cornel West speaks primarily of Hip-Hop when he addressed the need to engage youth culture. West powerfully illustrated how the nihilistic sentiments that plagued the youth were germane to both the “wealthy kids in the vanilla suburbs and the poor kids in the chocolate cities.”¹¹ It was the same thing Bakari Kitwana talked about when he said, “Hip-Hop has been the response of reckless abandonment of young people in this country.”¹² Red and yellow, black and white, rich and poor, homo or heterosexual all young people were on board with Hip-Hop because they were convinced that older generations were not listening to them. West further argued specifically for substantive engagement with Hip-Hop when he called it “precious soil in which the seeds of democratic individuality, community, and society can sprout.”¹³

Both Bakari Kitwana and M.K. Asante argued that the Hip-Hop cultural movement and the “post Hip-Hop generation” harnessed the potential energy to be the

¹⁰ Gary L. McIntosh, *Look Back, Leap Forward: Building Your Church On the Values of the Past* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 2001), 130-35.

¹¹ Cornel West, *Democracy Matters: Winning the Fight Against Imperialism* (New York, NY: Penguin Books, 2005), 175.

¹² Kitwana, *Why White Kids Love Hip Hop*, 10.

¹³ West, *Democracy Matters*, 185.

primary agent for change in issues like education, economic infrastructure development, employment and worker's rights, reparations, youth poverty and disease, anti-youth legislation and foreign policy.¹⁴ One would be hard pressed to find a minister or church in a black community that was not concerned with these issues. The question is, is the church willing to engage Hip-Hop in a manner that seeks to equip its young people intellectually and spiritually that they may engage the sociopolitical issues of the 21st century in substantive ways? The church must provide opportunities for character and leadership development among the youth of this kind in order to see a desired end.

In *The Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose contended that the collective power of music conglomerates, along with mainstream music outlet's creation of "commercial hip-hop" created great tension and little space within Hip-Hop for varying modes of expression. Aside from what she called the "gangster-pimp-ho trinity" there seemed to be only the slim distinction of "politically conscious rap" as an alternative.¹⁵ Rose argued that the consumer populated needed to "challenge and re-envision" Hip-Hop to create a new political ethos that would "enable and support progressive change, mutual respect, and empowerment."¹⁶ As the primary institution of black communities, black churches should be the first to support and critique Hip-Hop as a vibrant form of cultural expression.

Michael Eric Dyson added some powerful prescriptions for ministry. He argued that speaking slang was not enough when he said:

¹⁴ Bakari Kitwana, *The Hip-Hop Generation*, 178-82. Also in M.K. Asante, *It's Bigger Than Hip Hop: the Rise of the Post-hip-hop Generation* (New York, NY: St. Martin's Griffin, 2009), 8-11.

¹⁵ Tricia Rose, *The Hip Hop Wars: What We Talk About When We Talk About Hip Hop--and Why It Matters*, 11.2.2008 ed. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2008), 241-43.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 246.

There is a desperate need to reach young blacks, to touch them where they live. But stereotypes about black youth culture can't replace the hard work it takes to get inside that culture. Indiscriminate, anachronistic slang can't do the job that real love and respect will to win their appreciation and gain their ears and eyes. The real challenge is to translate the gospel into action—to sever it from bourgeois respectability and moralistic condemnation and to use it as a weapon of the suffering and oppressed to make justice a reality. What black youth need are jobs and spiritual renewal, moral passion and enough money to act with decency and self-respect.¹⁷

In another place Dyson contended for more listening between the generations. “So many young black people are cut off from the political wisdom they might receive if older black people would sit down and talk to them, teach them, converse with them—and, yes, learn from them. Older folk shouldn’t be about beating young folk down.”¹⁸ It was clear that Dyson’s reference to political wisdom could be read as any form of wisdom including spiritual wisdom. With such an admonition came the challenge for church elders, clergy and lay-leaders alike to exhibit more patience with the Hip-Hop community in order to engender greater understanding and more productive dialogue.

In *The Soul of Hip Hop*, Daniel White Hodge argued ministers and theologians alike needed to develop a theology of the profane in order to better engage Hip-Hop. He referred to the profane as “the contours of life that are deemed evil, wicked, immoral and corrupt... Yet for the Hip-Hop community, it is the reality of life, especially in the projects.”¹⁹ Hodge addressed Hip-Hop’s willingness to process the whole of life—the

¹⁷ Dyson, *Between God and Gangsta Rap*, 137-38.

¹⁸ Michael Eric Dyson, *Know What I Mean? Reflections On Hip-Hop* (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2007), 81.

¹⁹ Daniel White Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop: Rims, Timbs and a Cultural Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2010), 160.

good with the bad while Christians seem to be uncomfortable with the profane to the extent of hypocritically repressing their own shortcomings and inconsistencies. Ebony Utley intricately dealt with this concept in *Rap and Religion*. She began discussing the prayers in the lyrics of prominent rappers. Oftentimes their prayers illuminated a deep (though often misinformed) approach to theological concepts like theodicy and judgment. Yet, it's rap's honesty about the underside of life that provided the fertile ground for theological exploration.²⁰ The deepest, hardest questions were usually directed toward the Divine no matter who or what one thought the Divine actually was. This is the process of theology.

On the other hand Monica Miller contended that religious themes in Hip-Hop were really not all that religious when she said, "It is often the case that the use of religion, spirituality, philosophy, or street metaphysics in popular culture doesn't represent belief in a confessional sense, rather, it shows the manner in which the use of these structures...constructs authenticity, authority and consent for something more practical and pragmatic in life."²¹ However, in Anthony Pinn's *Noise and Spirit*, Ralph Watkins argues that the lack of traditional religious affiliation has not stopped Hip-Hop from engaging in authentic and robust theological discourse.²² He refers to the type of

²⁰ Ebony A. Utley, *Rap and Religion: Understanding the Gangsta's God* (Santa Barbara, CA: Praeger, 2012), 19. Utley explores rappers' response to God's silence. She cites a profound song by 50 Cent that deals deeply with theodicy and God's (non)response to injustice; particularly betrayal.

²¹ Monica R. Miller, *Religion and Hip Hop* (Routledge Research in Religion, Media and Culture) (New York, NY: Routledge, 2013), 69.

²² Ralph Watkins, "Rap, Religion, and New Realities: The Emergence of a Religious Discourse in Rap Music," in *Noise and Spirit: the Religious and Spiritual Sensibilities of Rap Music*, ed. Anthony Pinn (New York, NY: NYU Press, 2003), 185.

theological process that Hip-Hoppers utilize as “sociotheological semiotics.”²³ This is a sort of “bottom-up” approach to theology as opposed to a “top-down” or traditional approach. This was also where Hodge’s concept of the theology of the profane comes in. Hip-Hop is actively grappling with the hard questions of evil and suffering whether or not the church was willing to partner for the journey. Hip-Hop is searching for truth, just as Cone suggested that blues is a quest for truth in the black experience.²⁴

Hodge contends that churches will often give “condescending” lip-service to Hip-Hop culture with a Hip-Hop service or use Hip-Hop as an evangelistic hook without willingness to truly engage with the culture and thus embrace Hip-Hop’s own process of grappling with the tension of sacred and profane realities.²⁵ This issue might be well illustrated by the findings within the *Valuegenesis* study.

The *Valuegenesis* study was an extensive 1990 survey conducted by SDA leaders that sought to measure discipling systems and spiritual growth patterns and sentiments among SDA youth attending SDA schools. The study yielded interesting insight into the frustrations of young people and inconsistencies and miscues of the church. Recommendations of how SDA leaders might better engage SDA youth were largely focused on two areas: communication and Christian example.²⁶ Leaders were cautioned on the need for effectively communicating the value and primacy of grace above legalism and works as well as the other significant doctrines in meaningful and relevant ways. In

²³ Ibid., 188.

²⁴ Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 100.

²⁵ Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 21, 218.

²⁶ Roger L. Dudley and V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis: Faith in the Balance* (Riverside, CA: LaSierra University Press, 1992), 269-95.

reference to Christian examples youth expressed a great need to see the standards of the church modeled consistently by parents and leaders. Also, half of the youth surveyed felt that adults exemplified a “Do as I say, not as I do” approach to church standards.²⁷

In a follow-up study in 2000 the findings were re-packaged with a bright new bow, yet it appears that many of the suggestions of the initial study were simply unheeded. While society had progressed and some of the needs, sentiments and expressions of needs had slightly changed the church’s response to them had practically stayed the same. The study made strikingly similar recommendations in the second study as it had done in the first; including the need for relevant communication of teachings, along with teaching and modeling a Jesus-centered, grace-focused message and lifestyle.²⁸ The study authors also included this telling observation:

Sadly, much of the research on making good change has been widely ignored during the current rush to get on with the ‘real’ work or to install the best evangelistic technology, or build new buildings rather than focusing on the people and attitudes and procedures where change can happen best, and when done, makes a difference in the lives of everyone. We’ve often ignored the concept of Christian nurture. And while bringing new people into the fold is a biblical command, caring for the sheep is equally central for the church.²⁹

If the church’s studies of youth ministry within the church show poor communication and modeling patterns, it is scary to think about what a look into our evangelistic practices directed toward outsiders might tell us.

²⁷ Ibid., 154.

²⁸ V. Bailey Gillespie, *Valuegenesis (Ten Years Later a Study of Two Generations)* (Riverside, CA: Hancock Center, 2004), 343-58.

²⁹ Ibid., 341.

Even SDA pioneer Ellen White advocated for change and true success in ministry and evangelistic practice with very strong counsel. The book *Evangelism* was a compilation of numerous articles and letters that White wrote on the subject throughout her ministry. She challenged church leaders saying, “Let every worker in the Master’s vineyard, study, plan, devise methods, to reach the people where they are. We must do something out of the common course of things. We must arrest the attention. We must be deadly in earnest. We are on the very verge of times of trouble and perplexities that are scarcely dreamed of.”³⁰ White goes on to discuss the need for different methods in different places. She pressed that Jesus used a multifaceted approach in engaging people.³¹ White also urged leaders not to shrink from using new methods to reach varying demographics. She wrote, “Let us not forget that different methods are to be employed to save different ones. You have a hard field to handle, but the gospel is the power of God. The classes of people you meet with decide for you the way in which the work should be handled.”³² There is also strong counsel for leaders not to become stagnant in developing new methods of engagement when she wrote, “There are some minds which do not grow with the work but allow the work to grow far beyond them...Those who do not discern and adapt themselves to the increasing demands of the work, should not stand blocking the wheels, and thus hindering the advancement of others.”³³ In another place she added that there “must be no fixed rules” and that “Some of the methods used in this work will

³⁰ Ellen G. White, *Evangelism*, Christian Home Library (Hagerstown, MD: Review and Herald Pub. Association, 2002), 122-23.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 123.

³² *Ibid.*, 106.

³³ *Ibid.*, 104-05.

be different from the methods used in the work in the past,” but that no one should detract from the work by criticizing it.³⁴

Along with these calls for innovative approaches to ministry Ellen White taught that a balanced approach to ministry was essential. She argued for a careful mentoring program towards discipleship when she said:

Christ’s method alone will give true success in reaching the people. The Saviour mingled with men as one who desired their good. He showed His sympathy for them, ministered to their needs, and won their confidence. Then He bade them, “Follow Me.” There is need of coming close to the people by personal effort. If less time were given to sermonizing, and more time were spent in personal ministry, greater results would be seen. The poor are to be relieved, the sick cared for, the sorrowing and the bereaved comforted, the ignorant instructed, the inexperienced counseled. We are to weep with those that weep, and rejoice with those that rejoice. Accompanied by the power of persuasion, the power of prayer, the power of the love of God, this work will not, cannot, be without fruit.³⁵

Methodology

Having assessed various biblical, theological and theoretical frameworks concerning the need for change in ministry praxis and the significance and necessity of authentic treatment of Hip-Hop in ministry, it’s necessary to discuss various methodological approaches that may provide value, but that also present some challenges. First on the list is the most drastic of methods/measures in that it calls for a near-complete overhaul of methodology.

³⁴ Ibid., 105.

³⁵ Ellen G. White, *The Ministry of Healing*, Christian Home Library (Nampa, ID: Pacific Press, 2003), 143.

Although the concept of the Hip-Hop church may sound foreign, this methodology was pursued and practiced for years by numerous practitioners.³⁶ Possibly the most famous of Hip-Hop ministers was rap pioneer Curtis “Kurtis Blow” Walters. After his own conversion experience, Walters said he realized that there was always spirituality in Hip-Hop and so the response to create a Hip-Hop Church was natural.³⁷

In the book *Street Disciples* by Eric Gutierrez, Walters’ work is highlighted alongside the work of a white, middle-aged Episcopal pastor of a dying white church in the middle of what had become a black community. Pastor Timothy Holder was assigned to the pastorate of the Trinity Episcopal Church after their pastor of forty years passed away. After going through his own process of self-assessment, he recognized the need to communicate the gospel in a form that was relevant to those in his parish. He then decided to create the “HipHopEMass”—An adapted form of the episcopal communion liturgy that utilized the elements of Hip-Hop as vehicles.³⁸ Speaking of this creative liturgy Jeanine Otis wrote, “The HipHopEMass music and rhythmical spoken word is used creatively, at its best, to explore the human condition, to express and expunge the doubt and uncertainty of being, and finally, to uplift and strengthen the spiritual community.”³⁹

³⁶ Scotty Ballard and Shavonne Stewart, “The Ministry of Hip-Hop,” *Jet*, August 28, 2006, 30-33, accessed February 19, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=bDoDAAAAMBAJ&pg=PA30&hl=En&source=gbs_toc_r&cad=2#v=onepage&q&f=false.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Andrew Wilkes, review of *Disciples of the Street*, by Eric Gutierrez, *The Sojourners*, December 2008, 45-46, accessed April 8, 2013, <http://sojo.net/magazine/2008/12/hip-hop-holy-land>.

One noteworthy explication of the Hip-Hop church model comes from Pastors Phil Jackson and Efrem Smith in their book *The Hip-Hop Church*. Drawn largely from their work as pastors of churches in the inner-city, Jackson and Smith's work showed the correlations of the elements of Hip-Hop to the traditional church and specific methods of incorporating various aspects of Hip-Hop culture to the liturgy and life of the church. "One of the goals for the worship service at my church is that our services be Christ centered yet relevant to an urban, multiethnic hip-hop community. In order to do this we bring elements of hip-hop culture into our worship experience."⁴⁰ Smith continued saying, "We are committed to doing a full-fledged hip-hop service on a Sunday morning once every other month. In this service we pull together the elements that we may have used by themselves in other services. Whether by themselves or all together again the goal is to reach those living in hip-hop culture who are not yet Christians."⁴¹

Another notable instance is Tommy Kyllonen's Crossover Church in Tampa, Florida. Crossover Church was started as a non-denominational church-plant and community ministry that was later expanded into a full-scale Hip-Hop church. Shortly after the establishment of this church, Kyllonen assumed the position of senior pastor. While Kyllonen served as the church's youth pastor the church's youth ministry

³⁹ Marilyn L. Haskel, ed., *What Would Jesus Sing? Experimentation and Tradition in Church Music* (New York, NY: Church Publishing, 2007), 1, accessed February 19, 2014, http://books.google.com/books?id=EYp5AAAAQBAJ&pg=PT137&lpg=PT137&dq=Trinity+Episcopal+Church+of+Morrisania+in+the+South+Bronx.&source=bl&ots=zQPWIL9QJa&sig=1FUUVs_JdXj6O3SuWjSYcXnm5es&hl=en&sa=X&ei=UPoEU9zFNqnT0wGhy4HYCQ&ved=0CEoQ6AEwBQ#v=onepage&q=Trinit.

⁴⁰ Efrem Smith and Phil Jackson, *The Hip-Hop Church: Connecting with the Movement Shaping Our Culture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 2005), 197

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 197-98.

developed a unique and authentic Hip-Hop style. Kyllonen, a Christian rapper, incorporated the elements of Hip-Hop into the youth ministry and watched it expand and grow. Consequently, when he became the senior pastor the church naturally continued to develop the identity that he brought to the youth ministry. Crossover church was structurally modeled after the Rick Warren's Purpose Driven model.⁴² Yet, Kyllonen and Crossover have transposed the concepts to meet their context and the people who live in it.

The primary challenge with this approach is fairly obvious in that senior church members will most likely not be excited about drastic changes in the worship service and environment. Even the most seasoned leaders who desired change and innovative ministry find this approach unsettling. Imagery and traditions in liturgy are extremely sacred and they must be treated as such. Nevertheless, even more sacred at times are people's personal perceptions of those images and traditions. Smith and Jackson cautioned, "Still other churches, though, may come to the conclusion that now is just not the time to bring hip-hop into the worship services. I encourage you not to bring unneeded division into your church."⁴³ They also recommend that it may be beneficial to incorporate Hip-Hop elements carefully by simply referring to it as "youth ministering to adults" because older members often just like seeing the youth involved and participating.⁴⁴

⁴² Tommy Kyllonen, *Unorthodox: Church. Hip-Hop. Culture.* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), 62.

⁴³ Jackson, Smith, *The Hip-Hop Church*, 198.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 199.

Ralph Watkins argued another challenge was “the absence of the elders.”⁴⁵ This meant that the church would not be able to benefit from the trans-generational dialogue that enhances community. Just as family values are passed down from generation to generation, so church doctrines and traditions depend heavily on this sort of exchange. One issue was that the Hip-Hop community in general has very few elders. Also, black churches are currently struggling to make this trans-generational exchange happen in substantive ways rather than having constant conflict.

Another approach involved what might be called Hip-Hop Hermeneutics. This approach involved a dialogue with Hip-Hop culture and Hip-Hoppers about the text of the music and other artistic offerings within the culture. Ralph Watkins employed Hip-Hop Hermeneutics in *Hip-Hop Redemption* where he exegetes the work of artists like Lauryn Hill, Mos Def, DMX and others.⁴⁶ The aforementioned work by Utley applies this approach extensively and immaculately. The goal was to find pieces of truth that could be used to spur on more productive exchange and growth for members to grapple with the challenges that are an ever-present reality to those who are stakeholders in the Hip-Hop community. This approach involved parsing the lyrics, interpreting imagery in music and visual media, dialoguing with listeners about how the music was connecting with them and reflecting on responses to the various forms of art. This process may take on many forms; blogs, listening parties, youth bible studies or rap sessions.

⁴⁵ Ralph Basui Watkins, interviewed by author, August 18, 2011, interview The 21st Century Church, audio recording, YouTube, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ewVWflbRkuY>, Atlanta, GA.

⁴⁶ Ralph Basui Watkins, *Hip-Hop Redemption: Finding God in the Rhythm and the Rhyme*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), xii-xiii.

The challenges with this approach were primarily related to the harsh and depraved images that are presented in the music. Much of the subject matter in rap music is very disturbing. To hold this sort of dialogue within the church would be met with some sort of reservation if not complete rejection. There are many who would say that secular music ought to never be brought within the church. Also, discussing these difficult ideas may bring light to some very disturbing issues that younger church members may be involved in like: drug abuse, violence/gang activity or illicit sex. These issues must be approached with extreme caution.

Another approach is that of incarnation for mentoring and discipleship. The work of Hip-Hop Hermeneutics is work that requires a patient heart and a listening ear. This was Ralph Watkins' goal when he became a DJ: to listen, learn and hear the heart of this culture of young people.⁴⁷ Listening to Hip-Hoppers provides opportunities for relationship. These relationships, forged out of sincere concern and invested time, provide countless opportunities for discipleship and spiritual mentoring. Hodge discussed this when he said, "Hip-Hoppers do not need more information about God; they need relationships and the freedom to contextualize the Gospel into their own terms without strings attached."⁴⁸ Although it may not be true that Hip-Hoppers don't need more information about God, it is true that the church would be wasting its time with more sermonizing. It is also true that Hip-Hoppers have an expansive lexicon of theology and faith that has been forged in the urban center in circumstances that might make any

⁴⁷ Ralph C. Watkins et al., *The Gospel Remix: Reaching the Hip Hop Generation* (West Monroe, LA: Judson Pr, 2007), x.

⁴⁸ Hodge, *The Soul of Hip Hop*, 229.

normal person give up hope completely. However, vibrant relationships will help Hip-Hoppers to apply faith to context and to work out the finer points of doctrine and righteous living.

The challenge here was that Hip-Hoppers' lives were not as clean and simple as those of believers whose lives have been conditioned by the norms of church culture and the Christian lifestyle. Believers may be inclined to shrink from hanging with "winebibbers and sinners," but this is essential. Court dates, curse words, baby mama drama, eviction notices, drug use, probation, and the like are all issues and stages in the journey of those traveling the road of life in Hip-Hop culture. Mature believers and leaders must be willing to walk with them.

Centers for Change serves as another model within Hip Hop Hermeneutics. A center for Change (CFC) is any community service-oriented, or recreation center that is focused on providing a safe environment for growth, development and community building. So many young people are without safe spaces where they can go and be surrounded by positive influences and resources for growth and change. Many of the youth in Hip-Hop culture have experienced the ravages of divorce, displacement, drug-abuse, mass incarceration and more.⁴⁹ These issues have left the homes of so many reeling and incapable of around the clock nurture and support, which they so desperately need. On the other hand, there are countless churches where the space is simply under utilized during the week. Moreover, churches like Ephesus are constantly in a process of

⁴⁹ Michael Eric Dyson, *Holler If You Hear Me*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: Basic Civitas Books, 2006), 33.

developing their physical plants. Yet, how often are the new spaces specifically reserved to create that safe space for youth to come and build?

One major challenge with this approach is that these sort of programs often require a major investment with little to no financial return. Building new physical structures is always a major investment. An additional consideration would be how the programs would be staffed and managed. Staffing is an expensive investment whether with the time and energy of volunteers or a full-time paid staff; there are no easy answers to recruiting and compensating competent staff-persons. It might be that the church can provide assistance and support to an existing CFC that is in need of additional programming.⁵⁰ While the financial commitment is much smaller in this sense, it still proves challenging to find consistent volunteers.

Finally, one additional method for ministry to Hip-Hop culture is to galvanize youth and community members around local, national, and world social justice issues; especially those that have direct impact on inner-city youth. The recent murders of Oscar Grant, Trayvon Martin and Jordan Davis highlight for so many young black males the risks that they live everyday. The church has to show that it recognizes the constant loss of life and the often-unjust murders that so many people experience.⁵¹

The church must also show that it stands in solidarity with these families as they grieve and mourn. Beyond the issues of violence and the constant loss of life, related issues like mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex both have tangible

⁵⁰ Christopher C. Thompson, "The Rec Center Support System," *Best Practices for Adventist Ministry*, October 7, 2009, accessed February 24, 2014, <http://archive.constantcontact.com/fs033/1101578508634/archive/1102731356525.html>.

⁵¹ Christopher C. Thompson, *Training Days*, 1ST ed. (Capshaw, AL: Spirit Reign, 2012), 76-9.

impacts on the home life of many living in urban communities. Michelle Alexander referred to it as “a stunningly comprehensive and well-disguised system of racialized social control that functions in a manner strikingly similar to Jim Crow.”⁵²

Speaking of the hope to create new models and efforts that work to produce new systems of justice, M.K. Asante wrote, “It is there—among the decision makers—that the problems that plague all of us are preserved...Instead it is organizing in such a way to attack the injustice at its root and save the lives of our unborn children and grandchildren ...it is up to us to imagine a new system—not rooted in the past of America’s slavery days, but in the freedom of tomorrow.”⁵³

One of the challenges is rooted in a particular way of thinking and philosophy. SDAs often struggle with the concept of being heavenly-minded, while being of earthly good. Adventists look forward to the second coming, the destruction of Satan and wickedness along with the reconstruction of the earth made new. Because of this it often appears that there is a great tension with social action and a possible fear with becoming too preoccupied with the present world. After all, “we’re just pilgrims passing through.” Churches must work through their own theological framework of social and civic responsibility in the light of convictions about the eschaton.

While visiting a sister in Fort Lauderdale something very intriguing took place. The housing projects where she lived were not far from the downtown area, yet it was a little too far to walk. As with any other city, certain major holidays are celebrated with, in

⁵² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, Reprint ed. (New York, NY: New Press, The, 2012), 4.

⁵³ Asante, *It's Bigger than Hip-Hop*, 169.

part, parades. The parade however, never comes through the projects. Local community drug dealers and thugs bring out their show cars and perform a type of local parade for the poor kids in the projects. Kids line the street and hang out of windows and doorways as these candy-painted cars roll by with huge shiny wheels and loud stereo systems. As “ghetto” as it may be it is indeed delivered from a compassionate heart and care for one’s local community.

The cars are symbols of wealth, prosperity, hope and happiness in a deeply depraved environment. There are few jobs, but lots of drugs, poverty and pain. Not even the parade comes this way, but at least the hood still thrives. It is not all bad. The air is filled with sweet smoke from the barbeque grilles, and the sound of music is blasting from the beats through big speakers. The rims are shining. The gangsters are smiling. And the little kids are all ooohs and awes. There is no violence except maybe a few fistfights here and there, but today is a holiday. Today “it’s all good in the hood.”

This is the spirit of Hip-Hop. In the midst of brokenness and degradation there is still music playing. There is still happiness and creativity. There is still a sort of prosperity. There is still a parade. The church can certainly relate to this sort of resilience. The resurrection of Christ is the greatest example of life and hope despite death and despair. Hip-Hop is determined to hope rather than despair. The church needs to engage Hip-Hop for all of its virtues and for all of its vices. Maybe the church should do as Dr. Cochran suggested and just commit to pastoring the parade.

Research Design

This training model was designed to equip and train lay leaders to be sensitive to issues and opportunities for ministry in Hip-Hop culture. The author observed an insular leadership team in an aging institutional church that needed to re-envision missional directives. The model utilizes a teacher-student, seminar-classroom style environment where participants received information and instruction about the subject matter.

It is the belief of the author that the participants responded favorably and considered implementing the ministry methods presented in the training sessions. The expectation is that after being given relevant and compelling information about Hip-Hop culture lay-leaders would be encouraged to engage with and minister to Hip-Hoppers.

The project consisted of six training sessions that utilized audiovisual presentations to aid in the teaching process. The first session included a pre-test and a thirty-minute presentation on the Biblical, theological, and theoretical foundations for the project. The focus group is then confronted with church life-cycle theory, church growth theory, and biblical mandates for revamped approaches to evangelism and ministry. The focus group was then led in discussion concerning the implications of Christ's incarnation for contemporary ministry.

The second session addressed the history, values, mores and issues of Hip-Hop. Lay-leaders were confronted with Hip-Hop as a legitimate form of cultural expression. They were presented with various positive and redemptive aspects of Hip-Hop culture along with ongoing debates and challenges within Hip-Hop that present possible opportunities for the church to engage in dialogue with the culture.

The third and fourth session addressed various bridges for redemptive ministry. By discussing issues like social justice in the inner-city, mentoring, Hip-Hop churches and more, lay-leaders had the opportunity to survey various methods of ministry to Hip-Hop culture and respond, giving their own opinions as to whether such an approach was feasible for Ephesus.

The control group was comprised of lay-leaders who were involved in the soul-winning and discipleship ministries of the church. This group was primarily made up of Elders. Elders are selected by a nominating committee of church members to serve as pastoral care and ministry providers to the church. Nevertheless, there are others who might be included with this group because their ministry works closely with the Elders.

Futuring: Transition & Change for the 21st Century Church (Pre-Test)

Directions: Circle all choices that apply.

1. Hip-Hop is...
 - a. loud obnoxious music that I don't understand.
 - b. The stuff they play on BET and MTV
 - c. a vibrant and creative way of life
 - d. music, art, rapping, and dance
 - e. A snare from Satan that is chaining and enslaving our youth.
2. Hip-Hop arose...
 - a. As an outlet for rebellious youth.
 - b. As a response to economic and sociopolitical oppression
 - c. As a safe way to have fun.
 - d. As young people did not learn how to play instruments.
3. Who is the founder of Hip-Hop?
 - a. Satan
 - b. DJ Kool Herc
 - c. Afrika Bambataa
 - d. DJ Grandmaster Flash
4. What is the correlation between Trayvon Martin & Hip-Hop?
 - a. Young black males are at risk everywhere.
 - b. Trayvon Martin was a rapper.
 - c. Rappers made songs about Trayvon Martin.
 - d. Trayvon Martin's death is almost identical to Tupac's.
5. What is the correlation between the incarnation and Hip-Hop?
 - a. Hip-Hop parties look a lot like the places Jesus went to do ministry.
 - b. Jesus might have been a rapper if he lived today.
 - c. Hip-Hoppers are the present-day winebibbers and sinners.
 - d. Jesus might have been a DJ if he lived today.
6. On Mars Hill...
 - a. Paul was deeply disturbed by the idolatry.
 - b. Paul used the local images to preach Christ.
 - c. The city elders ran Paul out of town.
 - d. The people laughed Paul to scorn.
7. In Isaiah 56...
 - a. God invites even rejected people to join the remnant.
 - b. The Holy Mountain is a symbol of God's eternal kingdom.
 - c. God calls his house a house of prayer for all people.
 - d. God's covenant is reestablished.
8. Which of the following includes the four elements of Hip-Hop
 - a. Breaking, Emceeing, DJing, Dancing
 - b. Breaking, Rapping, Creativity, Swag
 - c. Graffiti, Breaking, Emceeing, DJing
 - d. Graffiti, Rapping, Emceeing, DJing
9. Which of the following is the fifth element of Hip-Hop?
 - a. Knowledge of History
 - b. Knowledge of Self
 - c. Knowledge of Community
 - d. Knowledge of God
10. The best ministry to engage Hip-Hop culture might be...
 - a. Relationships/friendship evangelism
 - b. Hip-Hop Church Service/Concert
 - c. Community Service/Recreation Centers
 - d. Tent Meeting/Revelation Seminars

Futuring: Transition & Change for the 21st Century Church (Post-Test)

Directions: Circle all choices that apply.

1. Hip-Hop is...
 - a. loud obnoxious music that I don't understand.
 - b. The stuff they play on BET and MTV
 - c. a vibrant and creative way of life
 - d. music, art, rapping, and dance
 - e. A snare from Satan that is chaining and enslaving our youth.
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 - b. Hip-Hop Church Service/Concert
 - c. Community Service/Recreation Centers
 - d. Tent Meeting/Revelation Seminars

11. What are the foreseeable challenges/issues that prevent the effective implementation of the methods discussed in these sessions? _____

12. What are the foreseeable benefits of implementing some of the methods discussed in these sessions? _____

13. Additional Notes/Feedback: _____

This study utilized qualitative analysis methods to assess participants' understanding of Hip-Hop culture, views about Hip-Hop culture, and attitudes towards changes in evangelism practices as well as Hip-Hop styled ministries.

In preparation of the project implementation there were numerous consultations with the local professional consultant/Senior Pastor (Dr. Donald Burden) concerning meeting dates and session format. The focus group was made up of primarily the church Elder, however, Dr. Burden reserved the right to invite any additional lay-leaders, like the personal ministries coordinator or community service coordinator, to aid in the establishment of a comprehensive core of lay-leadership directly involved in evangelistic and discipleship ministries. These preliminary meetings provided those involved an opportunity to begin identifying those who might be included. Also, significant coordination was done with context associates to coordinate session logistics and format.

Project Calendar

- April 13 - Session 1
 - Pre-Test
 - Biblical Foundations
- April 27 - Session 2
 - Theological, Theoretical Foundations
- May 4 - Session 3
 - Hip-Hop Culture: Concepts & Issues
- May 11 – Session 4
 - Methods of Engagement 1
- May 18 - Session 5
 - Methods of Engagement 2
- May 25 – Session 6
 - Review and Discussion/feedback
 - Post-test

Follow-up meetings consisted of one on one consulting sessions with lay-leaders who attended the session to continue dialogue and get personal feedback on their views of

how Ephesus might begin to implement these methods. Lay-leaders may voice their views of how various issues and challenges might make implementation of such methods difficult.

CHAPTER SIX

PROJECT ANALYSIS

Session One

The first session was conducted in conjunction with a regularly scheduled elders meeting. The elders meeting progressed as normal and the training session was added to the back end of the meeting. Senior Pastor, Dr. Donald Burden usually gave remarks, announcements, and directives from the pastor's office. At this particular meeting, Dr. Burden gave them a more detailed explanation of the training sessions and passed out the series description and schedule. The invitees who did not serve on the elders board were asked to come at the time that it was expected for regular elders but for the training session. The non-elder invitees consisted of the youth ministry leader, prison ministry leader, "Take it to the Street" outreach ministry leader, community service leader, and because the personal ministry leader happened to be an elder, his associate leader was invited.

Pre-Test

The session began with the pre-test and a brief thank you and overview for scheduling the sessions. Given the nature and length of the elders meeting it was necessary to ensure that this first session did not last long. It was agreed that the presentation would be condensed in order to encourage the group to return for the second

session. As the group completed the survey they were obviously caught off-guard by the questions. They audibly groaned and a few even made comments like, “I don’t know.” “Can I mark a qualifying note?” “This is good...we need this.”

Biblical Foundations

In addition to introductory remarks and a schedule overview, the introductory session also surveyed the biblical foundations of the research project. The participants were given a truncated exegesis of Isaiah 56:1-8 and Acts 17:16-34. The texts explored God’s purpose and plan to reach the gentiles. While in Isaiah God promised that even outcasts and foreigners will be invited to God’s mountain-kingdom, in Acts 17 Paul stands on a mountain and utilizes secular language and imagery to invite the gentiles to join God’s family. The seminar included visual aids in the form of a PowerPoint presentation to supplement these points.

The session concluded with a short question and answer period. The group was really engaged making connections to their respective areas of ministry. One person commented specifically along the lines of how SDAs were so hardwired around goals, numbers and desired results concerning sharing the gospel saying, “Your whole theology is contrary to what we practice...it’s an uncomfortable approach.” The prison ministry leader then chimed in to acknowledge that it can’t always be about numbers saying that in the prison ministry work, “we’re just planting seeds.” Dr. Burden concluded the discussion saying, “This study will help us all as leaders to be more open...”

Even after the group began to disperse one of the elders requested a private conversation where she asked in a round-about way how we should relate all this to the

standards of the church, requirements for new converts and simply, “where do we draw the line?” It’s a common concern that people have. If we’re just “planting seeds,” and “meeting people where they are,” at what point and in what way do we demand or encourage them to live up to the standards we hold dear as a body? It’s a question that was often posed in these sorts of discussions. It appeared that this was the very issue that the church was wrestling with in Acts. The Jews were certain that the gentiles needed to get in line and follow their ways. After all, “salvation is of the Jews.” However, God was creating a new group whose criteria would operate differently from that of various Hebrew cultural idiosyncrasies. And in many ways those idiosyncrasies included traditions and rites that held deep spiritual meaning for Jews. How and why would they give those things up? They were marks of virtue and truth. And some things must never be sacrificed, right?

It was evident that the group had gotten off to a very strong start. Several of the invitees were absent due to prior engagements, yet the survey was made available online via survey monkey along with video from the first session including the PowerPoint slides for at-home convenience. The absent group members were sent notifications about the pre-test and instructed to complete it online. After they completed the pre-test, they were given access to the video. They were encouraged to post their comments to YouTube or to send them via email.

Session Two

The session began with prayer and a short review and recap of the how the sessions were organized and an overview of the logistics of the day’s session. The session

covered theological and theoretical foundations for ministry to Hip-Hop culture. The theological focus was on that of the Incarnation of Christ and its implications for ministry praxis. Then, the theoretical sought to provide a basic survey of some of the scholars and writers who addressed the issues of church life cycle, evangelism, African American culture, and Hip-Hop. Recognizing the depth and breadth of the incarnation as a theological concept, the group utilized video clips from a sermon on the incarnation by a prominent SDA minister. The video clips provided the perfect launch pad to help the group engage the concept of the incarnation in a meaningful way.

Theological, Theoretical Foundations

Next, the theory was presented simply as a survey of the work of various authors and quotes from their books. The group was able to engage with Calvin B. Rocks' views about models of assimilation in American society, Gary McIntosh's Church Life Cycle theory, Jon Paulien's Fortress/Salt ministry model framework, Ellen G. White's famous statement from Ministry of Healing, Cornel West's estimation of Hip-Hop and youth engagement, and finally Bakari Kitwana's theory of youth abandonment.

When addressing the life-cycle theory the group all agreed that Ephesus was either in stagnation or decline. They identified this without full disclosure about the typical time-span/timeframe for each of the stages. This was a major moment of lucid clarity.

The feedback was very robust and lively. The leaders practically debated about what was at the heart of the church's decline. One participant remarked, "Our church needs a paradigm shift." There seemed to be unwillingness on the part one key leader in

particular to accept the issues presented. He appeared fixated on this idea that the church was in decline because of prevailing materialism, which, he believed, caused our spirituality to suffer. Nevertheless, others chimed in to oppose the idea. Another Elder added, “we really do we need a paradigm shift.” The discussion lasted for almost an hour after the presentation. Even after the bulk of the group left, a couple of the respected Elders stayed behind to discuss related issues even further.

Surprisingly, another participant made further connections to the concept of abandonment in Hip-Hop and how it related to the children in Ephesus. She remarked that, “we have also abandoned them inside the church.” She argued that most parents don’t bring their children for early morning Sabbath School bible study except for a very small number. Then, when they do come on Sabbath morning there is no teacher there to receive and teach them. “We treat them as if they don’t matter,” she added.

It’s always a beautiful thing when you’re teaching a subject and the recipients’ make a connection that hasn’t been covered yet. It’s one of the most affirming experiences for a teacher. In that moment, it was evident that the message was getting across. With the session in general, participants responded that they were enjoying it and that they felt the conversation was much needed.

Session Three

To combat an extremely busy summer schedule, Dr. Burden determined that the third and fourth sessions needed to be held on one day after the divine worship schedule. This posed a bit of a challenge in that most people spend those hours after church with family and close friends, which meant that it would be a bit of a challenge to commit to

such an event. A partial solution was to provide a Sabbath dinner for the group. This helped, yet the culture of the church was so deeply ingrained that it wasn't nearly enough to persuade them to cancel their afternoon dinner plans.

This plan was also complicated by the fact that two of the group participants had children graduating from high school around the same time as our sessions. Whereas one of them actually said he would try to make it, neither of them attended. Therefore the group started the sessions with only half of the focus group. In spite of this minor hiccup the group was eager to begin and so the presentation ensued.

Hip Hop Culture: Concepts & Issues

The third session sought to illuminate the historical and cultural dynamics of Hip-Hop culture. Having been convinced that it would be much more efficient to show the group what Hip-Hop was rather than tell them, the presentation was comprised of a series of videos that explained the various characteristics of Hip-Hop, the historical background of it's formative years, and examples of rap music and other forms of Hip-Hop media. Participants also got a chance to take a critical look at the manipulation and degradation of Hip-Hop culture and considered our response to those forces and influences in the light of the history and true spirit of Hip-Hop.

Participants were fully engaged in the presentation. They did not wait until the end to ask their questions. They quickly jumped in throughout the presentation whenever they saw an image that they thought was provocative. Early on, one person even asked whether the research would address how Hip-Hop connected with learning style theory (i.e. kinesthetic, auditory, etc.). Another participant, seeming a bit conflicted asking about

Hip-Hop's connection to drug culture. It was a very good question, but always a very difficult one to answer. Hence, the conversation shifted to the precarious relationship that Hip-Hop has with gangsterism from its inception. We compared this with America's legacy as an international gangster; deconstructing its glorification of the gangster persona in varying forms of media, particularly film.

At the end of the presentation one of the participants asked how people became so misinformed about what Hip-Hop was all about. So the discussion shifted again to the power of media. And how capitalistic forces are designed to create not simply products, but also a need for those products. The most powerful companies created a need and then presented the solution. We discussed how it has always been profitable for the oppressive power to demonize people of color. With Hip-Hop as a vehicle, the images could be altered and now this vilified group could be characterized in a brand new way.

It's questions like these that seemed to suggest that progress was being made with the group. Yet there was still a major concern that the core of the group was not receiving the full benefit of the info due to absenteeism.

Session Four

In session four the focus shifted to practical responses and ministry praxis. Both session four and five were designed to discuss possible methods of engagement and ministry to Hip-Hop culture. Participants were led to explore three different methods for building rapport with Hip-Hoppers and provide relevant ministry.

Methods of Engagement One

The first step or method is the hard work of learning to listen. It's a matter of learning how to hear the depth of content in the music as well as the ethos and heart from which it flows. Listening provided an opportunity to relate and respond. The second method involved a systematic response to social action. Hip-Hop has a long history of engaging social issues: note the Stop the Violence Movement and more recently the murder of Trayvon Martin. Hip-Hoppers were suspect of the church for their lack of engagement on the front lines of issues that effected people in our community. The third method addressed the need to create safe places where inner-city youth could have fun, learn, grow and express freely based on their own interests and experiences.

At the end of the session one participant commented that the church was not used to engaging at all. He referred to the church as having muscle atrophy. "We need to do something" he said, but "we're not ready to go all the way in like you're saying." It appeared to be the prevailing sentiment as others made similar points earlier on. They agreed that when it comes to social issues we don't do anything. One person even suggested that we don't even pray like we should. They seemed to believe that Ephesus doesn't know how to engage. One participant remarked that it appeared we were afraid of collaborating with other churches and entities because we're not secure in our own identity. There was this overarching sense of guilt in the room, which may not have been bad as guilt is a sign of conviction.

The question now is, how plausible is it to bring those who have missed sessions up to speed on all that has been addressed? The greatest concern is will they receive all of the information and how might this effect the data?

Session Five

This session was simply a continuation of session four wherein we discussed specific methods of ministry for engaging Hip-Hop culture. This particular session was in conjunction with the monthly elders meeting. This gave a sense of relief in that now there's an opportunity to help those who may have missed sessions to catch up. So there was a thorough review of the previous sessions along with a valiant attempt to be thorough and clear so that all participants were brought up to speed. This session focused on three particular methods: mentoring and discipleship, culturally relevant worship, and culturally relevant teaching.

Methods of Engagement Two

Even after a long elders meeting the elders were willing to stay for the teaching session after a short break. The session discussed how the church might create new systems of discipleship and mentoring to invite and include Hip-Hoppers into the privileged experiences of those within the ranks of the church. Also, the group explored how the church might utilize the elements of Hip-Hop to infuse the worship events and teaching venues with new vibrancy and flavor.

There was an overwhelming sense that the group had turned a corner. There were constant head-nods and engaging questions during the discussion period that made it clear that the group was really engaged. One of the participants asked about the difficulty that comes with understanding the music. This particular participant had missed the discussion about the value of listening and learning to listen. Yet, it was the perfect

opportunity to circle back and talk about the dynamism of language and the hard work of humility and tolerance that listening requires. Even when one of the more highly respected participants raised questions that seemed to be slowing the momentum in the group other participants chimed in to explain on their own. This support came from some surprising places as well.

One participant even followed up with a text message after the session to touch base and share a conversation that happened after the session dismissed. Apparently one participant shared how it was uncomfortable to hear the profane music, but still felt convicted of the need to engage and listen. The other then suggested that reading the lyrics on the Internet helped give a clear picture of what's being said. Nevertheless, the text message was primarily sent to say, "That was excellent!"

There's still a bit of concern as to whether or not each participant will have received all of the information by the start of the next and last session. The videos are turning out to be essential, and after this session there seems to be a much greater chance that if they missed a session they will go back and review. However, the final session does provide an opportunity to give a recap of all that had been covered and then proceed with the roundtable discussion. While leaving the room, one participant remarked on how beneficial the session was and that the discussion in the next session he was looking forward to. That sentiment certainly appeared to be true.

Thirty minutes after the session had ended discussion was still going on. Dr. Burden and another one of the elders were discussing the work of a young minister who had conducted an evangelistic series at the church a few years prior. This young man's story was relevant to the discussion because he's a pastor who was once a rapper who had

signed a major recording contract. This young pastor had conducted a very successful series that drew lots of young people and won approximately one hundred new people to the church. Yet these new believers did not stick around very long. The leaders seemed to agree that if there had been a church where those who had joined the church were allowed to be a part of a church/community of faith that operated with the same cultural style as the series and the preacher that had introduced them to the faith, then they may very well still be connected to the church.

It's evident that bridges are being built and connections are being made. Hip-Hop is starting to be seen by the group as a lifestyle rather than simply music. This is progress.

Session Six

Review

In this final session, the primary focus was to receive feedback from the group participants. The session began with a short recap of the content that was covered over the previous five sessions. A video covering the content from each of the sessions was made available for participants to watch if they were absent or if they simply wanted to be refreshed about the information. Nevertheless, it seemed necessary to provide a short recap just in case they hadn't seen the videos. The review was followed by the post-test. The post-test was comprised of the exact same questions as the pre-test. The only difference was that the post-test included three short-answer style questions to give participants an opportunity for personal reflection.

Post-Test, Discussion, & Feedback

After the post-test was completed, participants had a chance to reflect and respond verbally through group discussion. Prepared questions and some impromptu questions were fielded to the group to help them synthesize and respond to the sessions. Some questions discussed were: How might Ephesus respond to the implementation of some of the methods of engagement that were discussed in the sessions? What particular methods might be best used at Ephesus? Also, given the fact that there has been a successful major event with a Hip-Hop style that took place in the church in the recent past, how does the church now reflect on that event? Those questions along with others helped the group to process and reflect in a substantive way. As the group dialogued, more questions were raised to help them engage in deeper more meaningful ways.

The group seemed to understand the cultural tensions in the local church and the church at large when engaging a discussion about Hip-Hop. While one participant asked, “Why is it that Hip-Hop hasn’t been embraced by churches in the forty years since it’s inception?” One participant related its rejection to a sense of urgency, saying, “The church hasn’t responded because it wasn’t losing young people at the rate they’re losing them now.” Other participants seemed to jump right in to point out the church’s history of imposing European forms of expression on other people groups. One participant, who happened to be Nigerian-born, shared about how churches in Nigeria will not allow drums in their worship services, he explained the use of “divide and conquer” tactics to control and oppress people of color.

What was a bit surprising was a common theme in the conversation by various participants pointing out the history of the church and it’s natural tendency to “push

back” against new methods and new forms of expression. Each of them seemed to have an optimistic perspective calling it a “matter of timing” before Hip-Hop would be more widely accepted. A couple participants mentioned that they realized how Ephesus’ style, history, and culture might make a Hip-Hop style even more challenging. Two agreed that while this is true, “It’s important that we don’t alienate who we have.”

The session concluded with final words from the First Elder and Dr. Burden. The Elder remarked, “This is a good study. It’s always good to study different methods. Because when Jesus came he did things differently. He was seen as a radical and they killed him for it... We need to study this, and we need to study it with an open mind.” Dr. Burden concluded saying, “We’ve had many trends come through this church and there’s always some pushback... the heart of man is the same. Generations change, but the heart is the same... The real question is are we willing to take the gospel to the dying?”

Each participant was thanked and given a ten-fifteen dollar gift card to iTunes or various restaurants.

Data Analysis

The focus group was comprised of the church’s board of elders. This group represented the chief spiritual leaders of the church; subordinate only to the pastor. The elders provide spiritual leadership, support, and counsel to the church along advisory support to the pastoral staff. This particular elders board is comprised of a very capable group of veterans, doctors, educators, a lawyer and others. In addition to the elders, a special invitation was given to those ministry leaders whose ministry was outreach oriented. As the chief leaders and outreach specialists in the church, their responsibilities

required them to think deeply about evangelism, outreach and the direction of the church's ministries in general.

A majority of the elders, and a few of the invited ministry leaders attended the initial session. One of the expected challenges was that the elders (being busy professionals) would have inadequate attendance at the sessions. Anticipating this, each session was recorded on video and uploaded to YouTube so that any participant that missed a session would be able to go online and review what they missed. It was unclear if the group utilized this resource thoroughly, nevertheless, this was an effort initiated to address the anticipated absenteeism. Near the middle of the session (third or fourth), attendance dwindled to as few as nine with only ten people attending the final session. This obviously affected the data. Again, there were fourteen participants who took the pretest, and only ten that took the post-test. Thus the data is not a perfect sample of the group, yet it does reflect, in a great sense, the progression and direction of the group during the training sessions.

The pretest and post-test were identical, except the post-test included a three-question short answer addendum that was designed to allow participants to give a more personal response to the training sessions. The content of the sessions were designed around the questions asked in the pre-test. Therefore, by asking the exact same questions in the post-test that were asked in the pretest, the researcher had the opportunity to ascertain how much of the training session content was grasped along with how participants understood the content.

Participants were orally instructed to, via printed directions on the pre-test and post-test, mark all the answers that applied. This meant that most questions were intended

to have multiple correct answers. One question was simply a matter of opinion and one required one right answer. While some questions were intentionally vague, others may have simply been difficult to understand, and thus the responses may have been affected by a lack of clarity concerning the questions.

The productivity and benefit of the training series was evidenced in a comparison of the responses of the participants on the pretest and the responses on the post-test. The participants were certainly informed by the training sessions and also encouraged to engage in new ways.

The very first question was one that was very telling. Participants were asked simply, “What is Hip-Hop?” When asked on the pre-test, nearly one third of respondents answered saying that Hip-Hop was a “snare from Satan that is chaining and enslaving our youth.” However, on the post-test not one respondent selected that response. In addition, thirty percent identified Satan as the founder of Hip-Hop on the pretest compared to zero on the post-test. When asked about the correlation between Hip-Hop and the incarnation after the training series one third of responders agreed that “Jesus might have been a DJ if he lived today,” compared to less than ten percent on the pre-test. Also, fifty-five percent agreed that Hip-Hoppers might be considered the “present-day winebibbers and sinners” that Jesus ministered to in the NT compared to twenty-eight percent on the pre-test.

On the pretest just over fifty percent agreed that Paul used local/secular images to preach Christ on Mars Hill compared to ninety percent on the post-test. On the pre-test only fifty-five percent agreed that according to Isaiah 56 “God invites even rejected people to join the remnant” compared to seventy-seven percent on the post-test. Sixty percent agreed that concerts/Hip-Hop church services were viable outreach models

compared to less than thirty percent initially. The vast majority of the group (sixty-four percent initially and seventy percent conclusively) agreed that informal settings and methods were the best options for outreach. Adversely, traditional forms of outreach (i.e. seminars and tent revivals) fell from twenty-eight percent approval to twenty percent.

In addition to the post-test, respondents were given an additional short-answer style format so that they could give a more extensive and personal response to the training module. The responses were generally positive. Among the responses were reoccurring themes. Several of the participants mentioned the value of the information given the basic lack of understanding about the subject. Several expressed perceived opportunities related to evangelism, church growth, and inclusion that would result from sharing this information. Several respondents expressed concern about prevailing traditionalism that might discourage the implementation of the prescribed methods.

The responses also highlighted some possible limitations of the measurement instrument, or the training method, or both. While fifty percent of the focus group effectively identified the four elements of Hip-Hop, there were still eight incorrect responses. This may be due to the striking similarity of the answer options. Respondents may have had a difficult time distinguishing the responses from each other. Grafitti, Breaking, Emceeing, DJing is so close to Grafitti, Rapping, Emceeing, DJing as well as the other options. It is highly likely that several respondents were simply confused about which was which.

Additionally, participants were asked who was the founder of Hip-Hop. While none of the participants identified Satan as the founder of Hip-Hop, the tool did not help to communicate that there was any sole founder of the culture. While the training

sessions may have communicated that particular concept, the tool may have led respondents to choose one or the other of the options. The directions were for participants to “select all that apply.” However, that particular directive might have been lost in the question.

The project was successful. The focus group demonstrated a strong grasp of the information presented and also expressed thankfulness that it was shared. Participants commented on the quality of the information, the order and process of the module, and expressed an interest in seeing the church adopt its methods to reach people as was discussed in the training module. Though some expressed concern about the implementation of the methods discussed there was strong consensus that such efforts were important to the life of the church.

Reflection, Summary and Conclusion

When someone starts talking about Hip-Hop in church older church folk often either tune out or they relate directly to the negative images of rap music videos and gangsterism that is so often streamed along the media airwaves. Nevertheless, Hip-Hop remains one of the preeminent cultural forms that embodies such a vibrant and robust aura of creative expression and protest. The conversations about inner-city ministry and urban evangelism abound, yet ministry leaders seemingly refuse to adequately engage Hip-Hop culture. However, the church must realize that to do urban evangelism and spurn Hip-Hop is like doing evangelism in Cuba and refusing to speak any Spanish.

Ellen G. White said, “The lessons of humanity must be given in the language of humanity.”¹ While Ellen White was not talking about Hip-Hop, she was talking about the Incarnation. It was God’s will to make manifest the essence of the Kingdom of Heaven by sending The Christ. The Advent was not marked by some celestial alien-baby in a flying saucer with special powers, but rather through a middle-eastern peasant family located in a specific time and place. Jesus spoke Aramaic and probably some Hebrew. He didn’t speak French, Latin or German, and he definitely didn’t speak what we like to call “proper English.” His ministry would have been null and void if he did. It is because of this fact that we realize that God demonstrated how to be relevant and local in our ministry. After all, “all ministry is local.”²

Churches must learn how to effectively engage Hip-Hop culture and to speak the language of Hip-Hop. Does that mean that the church must compromise the principles of holiness, righteousness and the like? Absolutely not! Hip-Hop is a global phenomenon that was birthed from the belly of the black urban poor. This means that the Black Church and Hip-Hop essentially have the same home base. Hip-Hop picked up where the Civil Rights Movement left off. Where black churches moved up the social strata and many cases moved out of the hood, the central focus of Hip-Hop is still the black, urban poor.

By refusing to engage Hip-Hop we are, in reality, ignoring the poor, abandoning our base and dashing our future hopes. Poor black kids use Hip-Hop as a creative response to displacement, oppression and subjugation. They respond to the blight by

¹ White, *The Desire of Ages*, 34.

² Brandon O'Brien, “All Ministry Is Local,” *Christianity Today*, May 8, 2011, 1, accessed April 21, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/parse/2011/may/all-ministry-is-local.html?paging=off>.

painting colorful murals on walls; they respond to the lack of safe recreational spaces by turning blacktops into dance halls; they respond to hate speech with poetry put to booming bass lines; they respond to their disjointed and interrupted lives by exaggerating them with broken acrobatic dance moves while the DJ looping break beats, mixed and scratched records; they responded to the exclusive sartorial styles of Fifth Avenue by creating their own fashions and trends. By engaging Hip-Hop, we say to them, "We see you. We hear you. We feel you. We love you."

You can't go anywhere these days without seeing it and hearing it and the church's response has long been to censor it or avoid it altogether. These are the voices of our urban youth demanding to be heard, and if the church wants to minister to them, we must at the very least, listen to what they are saying.

This leads us to a discussion of methodology. A big lingering question after the study was conducted was, "How?" And herein might be an initial hint of some of the great challenges in doing this kind of outreach. History says, Seventh-day Adventists love tent-popping, kit-driven, microwave ministry models. We want to know how it works and how long will it take? Will it give us the numbers we're shooting for? If it requires any long-standing investment and sustained effort, we're generally not interested. However this is a major key to reaching the Hip-Hop base. What's at stake is an entire generation of abandoned youth: abandoned by their fathers, their schools, the government, and often living in abandoned houses. One of the very pressing questions they are asking is, "Will you abandon us too?" The first order of business is to establish a sense of trust. This is not easy. This takes time.

The other issue that arises is that the church has no models for engagement that are designed to reach the unchurched. Every Net Ninety-___ series installment, every Amazing Facts, and Breath of Life campaign is designed to reach folks who at least have a Christian disposition. We have little to nothing designed to engage the unchurched in urban centers. So how does the church effectively engage the unchurched urban poor? This has yet to be seen. Nevertheless, what is certain is that there is no magic bullet. And again, there is no substitute for incarnational ministry: becoming one with the people as Christ did, meeting their needs, and then inviting them into discipleship.³ This is the only way.⁴

Should we all dress in jeans, hoodies and Timberland boots when we come to church? Should we resort to ceaseless concerts in order to reach our young people? Should every church be a Hip-Hop church? Should pastors rap in their sermons? The answer to all of those questions is no, but a big shout-out to the pastors and churches who will try these and a number of other methods in a sincere effort to communicate the gospel in a new and fresh way. This is exactly what Paul did on Mars Hill. I'm certain the Jews would have cringed if they heard him spouting those repulsive secular lyrics (Acts 17:28), but Paul utilized the prevailing local images to point the great Grecian minds to Christ. This is exactly what God promised in Isaiah 56. He said that even the outcasts and foreigners would be welcome to his eternal mountain-kingdom (Is. 56:7). He promised that even those castrated by the empire—read black, urban poor—should be welcomed into the blessed family.

³ White. *The Ministry of Healing*, 143.

⁴ Ibid.

It is apparent that some might be disturbed by the interchangeability and parallel drawn between Hip-Hop Culture and the urban poor. Nevertheless, ask any poor black kid what's in his iPod and you can be certain that ninety-nine percent of the time it's Hip-Hop. It's not Bob Dylan, The Beatles or George Strait—it's Hip-Hop. Hip-Hop is the soundtrack of the struggle. Once upon a time it was field songs. Then it was the blues and jazz. Then it was gospel. Now it's Hip-Hop. And not simply rap music, but the entire corpus of the culture that give it a full-bodied appeal to oppressed youth. The children are crying out to us. We can no longer shut them out simply because we can't stand the beat.

This is an essential conversation to be had while the church explores effective methods for future ministry, and the need to effectively transition and change to meet that future in a fruitful, God-honoring way.

After a close look at the data and a close listen to their responses it is evident that the study yielded positive results. The elders were informed about Hip-Hop and inspired by how and why the church must engage Hip-Hop with the gospel. There isn't enough discussion around culture and cultural issues in the church. Church members assume that contacts and converts should simply "be like us" because we have this life and the world all figured out. This kind of attitude and approach often alienates rather than invites. A careful consideration of cultural mores and values leads us to tolerance and understanding. And that understanding is essential that the church may begin to build bridges for effective ministry.

Seeing the light bulb come on for these leaders was a truly enjoyable experience to share. Were all of the questions answered? No. Were all problems solved and a ten-

year action plan devised? No. However, the group was provided with valuable information that will serve as the springboard for relevant ministry in the future.

When the training series began, the church was gearing up for a church-planting project. Shortly after the training series was over one of the elders spoke up about the church-planting project and said to the pastor, “We need to do something out-the-box.” What’s most surprising is that that particular elder is one of our more conservative leaders. It seems fairly obvious that a seed has been planted that will one day germinate and bear fruit toward a great harvest.

The elders were surprisingly receptive. They asked tough, pressing questions; which were carefully explored and worked out for greater understanding. At the outset of the training series, there was a bit of suspicion and a great lack of understanding around the subject. The series helped to shine light on the issues and also to supply possible solutions and methods of engagement.

This issue needs a great deal more exploration. More discussions and research needs to be done around methodology. Nevertheless, churches must be willing to risk the challenge of attempting new methods in an effort to be relevant while remaining faithful to the biblical mandate. Pastors must challenge churches to meaningful and strategic outreach in the hopes of reaching the urban communities. This demands that churches take an honest assessment of what is stifling their growth. It must be acknowledged that the current methods being utilized have not produced sustained growth quantitatively or qualitatively.

Ephesus did have an evangelistic crusade shortly after the study was complete. The evangelist who preached the nightly sermons was a living legend whose ministry has

inspired the work of countless ministers.⁵ A storefront meeting place was rented where nightly worship services were held. Tens of thousands of dollars was spent and more than ninety people were baptized. Today, very few of those people still attend church. The building that was utilized for the evangelistic meeting was transferred to another church and Ephesus has practically abandoned the project.

It would be irresponsible to say that the only reason for the failure of that particular effort was that it didn't engage the people along the lines of Hip-Hop. There were several factors that led to the result that transpired. Nevertheless, by utilizing a more organic approach and communicating the message of the gospel with language and symbols that were already familiar, the church had a better opportunity to build an organic community that the people could comfortably live and grow in.

Jesus loves people. He loves people so much that he spent lots of his time with the crowds. He taught them. He fed them. He healed them. He fraternized with the lost. He had even said, "For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost" (Lk. 19:10 NRSV). He spent so much time with them that the Pharisees called him a glutton and a winebibber. They called him a heathen because he hung out with heathens. But in the final analysis, by coming so close to the people he was able to show them the way of the Kingdom.

A close reading of the Incarnation suggests that if Jesus were to come to live on earth today, he'd probably be a Hip-Hop DJ spinning records at parties in the Bronx. He

⁵ It is necessary to add here that that evangelist T.A. McNeely was the mentor who gave Pastor C.C. Varner his start in ministry. C.C. Varner preached his first evangelistic meeting under the tutelage of McNeely. Varner soon after moved to South Carolina and using the same methods he learned from McNeely, pitched a tent, ran a couple evangelistic meetings and practically doubled the local SDA church membership in two years. Among those who joined the church was the author of this study and practically the entire Cook and Thompson family.

might even be a rapper. He would probably frequent all the popular nightclubs, not because he's looking for trouble, but rather because he's looking for people who are in trouble. He'd be looking for people who are slaves to sin and orchestrating the perfect opportunity to win them to his Kingdom and free them from sin. The pastors and denominational leaders would probably hate him, and possibly even try to kill him. Then he would die. But that's why he came, not to be served by the people, but to serve the people, and to give his life so that those very same people could be saved.

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